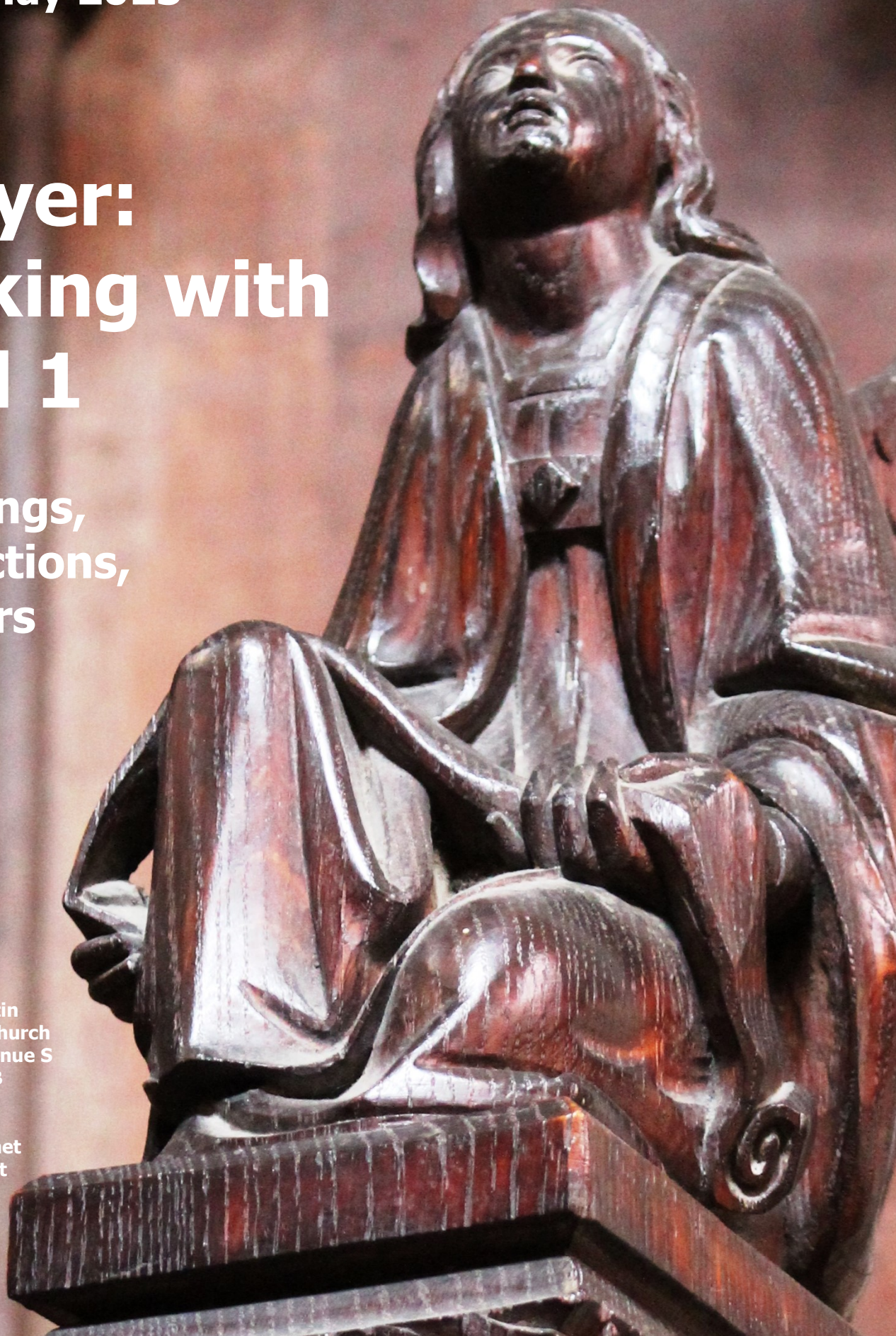


**April-May 2023**

# **Prayer: Talking with God 1**

**Readings,  
Reflections,  
Prayers**

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**Monday, April 17: Genesis 1:26-31**

*"God is inviting you – and me – to come home,"* writes Richard Foster, *"to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created ... The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer."* For the next few weeks, we'll be thinking about prayer. Prayer is simply God, the One who created us and loves us, sharing His heart and His love with us, and us sharing our lives with Him.

We'll be going through the Bible chronologically, looking at how God shows His love, compassion, mercy, grace, and care through the ages. And we'll be looking at how the people talk with Him, sometimes well, sometimes not so well. God will invite us to draw closer to His heart over the coming weeks.

Foster continues, *"For too long we have been in a far country: a country of noise and crowds, a country of climb and push and shove, a country of frustration and fear and intimidation. And God welcomes us home: home to serenity and peace and joy, home to friendship and fellowship and openness, home to intimacy and acceptance and affirmation."*

*"We do not need to be shy. He invites us into the living room of his heart, where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites into the kitchen of his friendship, where chatter and banter mix in good fun. He invites us into the dining room of his strength, where we can feast to our heart's delight. He invites us into the study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch ... and ask all the questions we want. He invites us into the workshop of his creativity, where we can be co-laborers with him, working together to determine the outcomes of events. He invites into the bedroom of his rest, where new peace is found and where we can be vulnerable and free. It is also the place of deepest intimacy, where we know and are known to the fullest."*

Genesis 1 reminds us we are God's creation. We are created in His image. Scholars have lots of opinions on what being made in "the image of God" means (I can direct you to commentaries if you wish). What God is really trying to tell us is simply He DID create human beings – YOU and I – and He loves us very, very much.

- Perhaps you've never really prayed. The God who loves you invites you to come ...
- Perhaps you are bruised, broken, bitter, or angry. The God who loves you invites you to come ...
- Perhaps you feel your prayers bounce off the ceiling. The God who loves you invites you to come ...
- Perhaps you think you're just not good enough. The God who loves you invites you to come ...
- Perhaps you've only prayed in crisis. The God who loves you invites you to come ...

And so, as we think about prayer, we need to know we are His beloved. We can sing (or if, like me, we cannot really sing, we can pray out) the words of Psalm 100:

*Shout with joy to the Lord, all the earth.  
Worship the Lord with gladness.  
Come before him, singing with joy.  
Acknowledge that the Lord is God.  
He made us, and we are his.  
We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.  
Enter his gates with thanksgiving; go into his courts with praise.  
Give thanks to him and praise his name, for the Lord is good.  
His unfailing love continues forever,  
and his faithfulness continues to each generation.*

We are not just random collections of relatively worthless organic compounds. You and I are God's purposeful, beloved, mind/soul/body-all-wrapped-together-in-an-amazing-way creations. He loves us each, dearly and passionately. The God who loves you invites you to come and have a conversation ...

*Lord, you became human to communicate with me.  
 You walked and worked on this earth.  
 You endured the heat and struggled with the cold.  
 All your time on this earth was spent in caring for humanity.  
 You healed the sick. You raised the dead.  
 Most important of all, you saved all of creation from death.  
 Lord Jesus, Your death on the cross has set us free.  
 Lord Jesus, your resurrection sealed the fate of evil and destruction.  
 Your mercy knows no bounds.  
 We can live joyously and freely, without fear of death.  
 We can live hopefully, knowing our lives are safe in Your hands.  
 We can live transformationally, empowered by Your Spirit.  
 We can live missionally, with a call to share Your love.  
 Cleanse our hearts and souls so we may live joyously in Your love.  
 Amen*

## **Tuesday, April 18: Genesis 2:4-25**

Genesis 2 has three main characters. The first, the main character, is God. He is the One who creates, forms, and shapes everything. The second two are the man (in Hebrew "*adam*," the Hebrew word for "*man*"; it's not really a proper name, "Adam") and the suitable helper/partner for him, the woman.

We can get all tied up in knots if we think this passage about the "science" or biology of human origins. Those modern scientific debates really seem irrelevant and silly when you read this passage. "Science," as we know it, didn't even really exist until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. I appreciate Sara Maitland's candor: "*While there is a great deal said about 'the pre-scientific worldview' and the modern scientific mind, we seem to find it hard to accept fully that Genesis was written down in a pre-scientific era so that whatever it is, it is not likely to be a scientific text.*" We lose the wonder, poetry, art, and passion of these passages – and the glory of God as Creator – if we strip them down and try to make them clinical texts for the biology lab, rather than passionate celebrations of relationship. We can totally miss the point.

Genesis 2 is "poetic theology" not "scientific theology." Poetic theology is far more profound and powerful because it explores truths through metaphor and imagery that are beyond what modern science can express in lab manuals. Contemporary science is incredible for describing some kinds of truth. It is not helpful for discussing other things like relationships with people (love for others) or our relationship with God (His love for us/our love for Him). We need other language to talk about such profoundly wonder-full (full of wonder) realities. More helpful than scientific explanations, poetry, story, and metaphor are great, true ways we can express what is deeply rooted in our hearts, souls, and minds.

This passage evokes wonderful images of a potter (God), lovingly shaping a beautiful work of art (the man), and then – miracle of miracles – breathing life into him (the word for "formed" (2:7) is the same verb used to describe the potter's work in [Jeremiah 18:1-6](#)). It creates an equally amazing image of two human beings – man and woman – joined, not at the hip, but at the rib. This is not dull genetics or evolutionary biology, but poetic imagery expressing profound *theological* truths that boggle the mind about who God is, who we are individually, who we are in relationship with God, and with one another. Spend some time with this passage as poetic theology – and be overcome with awe and wonder.

Read this passage over, prayerfully, reflectively, thoughtfully, a few times. What is God saying to you: about who He is? About who you are? About who significant people in your life are?

To help you get started: As you read this passage over, pray/think through the truths that

- God, our loving heavenly Father, shapes us in a very loving, personal, purposeful, profound way
- God, our loving heavenly Father, breathes life into us

- God, our loving heavenly Father, gifts us with relationships with other people
- God, our loving heavenly Father, invites us to “to tend and watch over” His creation
- God, our loving heavenly Father, establishes boundaries for us, for our own good (even though we may not understand them)

How is God speaking to you, today?

*For a few moments, I think of God's veiled presence in all things:  
in the elements, giving them existence;  
in plants, giving them life;  
in animals, giving them sensation;  
in people, giving them life and purpose and inestimable worth,  
and finally, in me, giving me all this and more,  
making me a temple, a dwelling-place of the Spirit.  
If God were trying to tell me something, would I know?  
If God were reassuring me or challenging me, would I notice?  
I ask for the grace to be free of my own preoccupations  
and open to what God may be saying to me.  
Lord, grant me the grace to be free from the excesses of this life.  
Let me not get caught up with the desire for wealth.  
Keep my heart and mind free to love and serve you.  
Amen*

### Wednesday, April 19: Genesis 3:1-13

What are we here for? What is life all about? All of creation – including us – exists to enjoy and glorify God. Genesis 3 gives us a wonderful picture of what life ought to be: “*When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man (Adam) and his wife heard the LORD God walking about in the garden ... the LORD God called to the man, 'Where are you?'*” (3:8-9). We were created to enjoy walking with, talking with, and living with God. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve’s sin and disobedience mess that all up.

*“That God-focused goal of human life (to glorify and enjoy God) is not something that sets us **apart** from the rest of creation,” writes Christopher Wright. “Rather it is something we **share** with the rest of creation. That is the ‘chief end’ of all creation. The only difference is that we **human** beings must glorify our creator in uniquely **human** ways. We are the only creatures who are made in the image of God, and so the praise and glory we bring to God reflects that status. So, as humans we praise God with hearts and hands and voices, with rationality as well as emotion, with language, art, music and craft – with all that reflects the God in whose image we were made. Our praise is explicitly **human** praise.”*

The rest of creation – animals, birds, trees, flowers, rivers, mountains – all praises God, too. We cannot begin to comprehend how a bear, fir tree, or mountain praises God. Nor can we begin to understand how God relates to His non-human creation. But He does (see also [Psalm 19](#), [104](#), [148](#), etc). Just because we don’t understand non-human worship doesn’t make it any less real. It humbles us to remember that the great God we worship and the wonders of His creation are far beyond our comprehension.

Prayer – conversation with this God who formed us and sustains us – is a rediscovery of that open, honest, free relationship God and Adam/Eve enjoyed. “*How good of God to provide us a way back into his heart,*” writes Richard Foster. “*He knows that we are stiff-necked and hard-hearted, so he has provided a means of entrance. Jesus, the Christ, lived a perfect life, died in our place, and rose victorious over all the dark powers so that we might live through him.*” This is great news. Through Jesus we can re-enter into God’s presence. We can enjoy the kind of freedom and fellowship for which we were created.

- Sometimes we’re afraid of God. Does He really love **me**? Yes, He does.
- Sometimes we think we’re not good enough for God. Through Jesus He has dealt with your sin and

- separation from Himself, once, for all, forever. As you confess your sin, you are totally forgiven.
- Sometimes we wonder if God really wants to spend time with **me**. Absolutely. He formed you.
- Sometimes we think God is hiding from us. God is looking for you, to spend time with you.

God asks **YOU, "Where are you?"** He really, really, really wants to share life with you. As you pray today, pray that you would know His presence, peace, wisdom, guidance, and grace today ...

*Dear Jesus, how desperately I need to learn to pray.  
And yet when I'm honest, I know that I often do not even want to pray.  
I am distracted.  
I am stubborn.  
I am self-centered.  
In your mercy, Jesus, bring my "wants" more in line with my "needs"  
so that I can come to want what I need  
rather than need everything I want.  
Most of all I need and want to know you –  
be the centre of my heart, soul, mind, and strength –  
be the source of every word I say and everything I do.  
Amen*

based on a prayer by Richard Foster

### **Thursday, April 20: Genesis 12:1-7**

Think about what you were doing, where you were, and who you were with last year on April 20? Five years ago on April 20? Ten years ago on April 20?

Life is a journey. Time doesn't stand still. Circumstances change. Life changes.

For Abram, life is literally a journey. God says to Abram, "Go ..." My first question would be, "Go where?" God tells Abram far more about where he is to go **from** – "from your country, your people, and your father's household" – than where he is to go **to** – "to the land I will show you." The final destination is very vague. It's wait-and-see. I'd find that very frustrating.

How does Abram respond? "*Abram went, as the Lord had told him ...*" Would I have done that?

For Abram this is also a spiritual journey. Abram is leaving **from** his pre-faith-in-God life with all its trappings **to** faith with God, trusting God with the destination. This is also a missional journey, as Abram's faithfulness will undo the separation from God that came with Adam/Eve's disobedience. God promises that, through Abram's faithful obedience, ALL people will know God's love, mercy, and grace. Unfortunately, Abram's descendants, the Jewish nation, don't catch the vision of being God's good news to everyone. God eventually will come Himself, in Jesus, to fulfill His mission to bring all people into relationship with Himself.

As we are thinking about prayer, let's pause for a moment and think about what this little passage says about Abram's relationship with God, and our relationship with God.

- In order to really know God, know Jesus, and walk in His Spirit, what might I have to leave behind?
- Are there things I hold on to, habits I have, security blankets I cling to, or my own personal goals that I am not willing to let go? What might I NOT be willing to give up to really follow Jesus? Why? What will I do about that?
- Am I willing to step out in faith and follow God, even if I don't know where I will end up? Or do I have to know the final destination?
- Do I really trust that God knows what is best for me? Do I have a control problem – **I** have to be in control? Why? What will I do about that?

Spend some time in reflection and self-examination, asking God to show you if there are any things in your

life you need to deal with. Are there things you need to confess? Are there things you need to turn over to Jesus? Do you need the Spirit's wisdom?

Be honest and open with Him. He loves you. He only wants the best for you.

*At this instant, as I come to prayer,  
God is present waiting for me.  
God always arrives before me.  
He desires to connect with me even more than my most intimate friend.  
I take a moment and greet my loving God.  
Dear Lord, help me to remember that You gave me life.  
Thank you for the gift of life.  
Teach me to slow down,  
to be still and enjoy the pleasures created for me.  
To be aware of the beauty that surrounds me.  
The marvel of mountains,  
the calmness of lakes,  
the fragility of a flower petal.  
I need to remember that all these things come from you.  
I ask for the grace to believe in what I could be and do  
if I only allowed God, my loving Creator,  
to continue to create me, guide me and shape me.  
Amen.*

#### **Friday, April 21: Genesis 14:17-20**

What do think of when you think of the word, "prayer"? What does prayer mean to you?

We often think prayer means we bring our concerns to God. That is perfectly true. Bringing "life," in all its messiness, to God is one very practical, very good approach to prayer. It is good – very good – to bring our concerns to God. God is happy to talk with us about all those issues.

In Genesis 14, four kings go on a rampage and, among other things, carry off Abram's nephew, Lot, and all his possessions (14:9-12). What would Abram have done? I suspect he would have prayed. Then Abram got down to business: he calls out the 318 trained men in his household. By any stretch of the imagination, that's a small force against four warlords. But, with God's help, Abram and his little band win the day and rescue Lot, his family, his servants, and his possessions (14:13-16).

On the way home, Abram meets a mysterious character, Melchizedek. He is both king of Salem (Jerusalem) and priest of God Most High. Not until Jesus is any other person described as both a king and a priest. Melchizedek blesses Abram AND reminds Abram that he has been richly blessed by God. It's good for us to know that we are blessed by God. An old Hymn reminds us:

*When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,  
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,  
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,  
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.  
  
Count your blessings, name them one by one;  
Count your blessings, see what God hath done;  
Count your blessings, name them one by one;  
Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.*

Bring your requests to God. And count your blessings, name them one by one ...

*Dear Lord, as I come to you today,  
 fill my heart and my whole being with the wonder of Your presence.  
 In Your loving presence I unwind the past day,  
 starting from now and looking back, moment by moment.  
 I gather in all the goodness and light, in gratitude.  
 I attend to the shadows and what they say to me,  
 seeking healing, courage, forgiveness.  
 Conversation requires talking and listening.  
 As I talk to Jesus may I also learn to be still and listen.  
 I can be totally honest with Jesus  
 as I tell Him of my worries and my cares.  
 I open up my heart to Him.  
 I tell Him of my fears and my doubts.  
 I ask Him to help me to place myself fully in His care,  
 to abandon myself to Him.  
 I know He always wants what is best for me.  
 Amen.*

**Saturday, April 22: Genesis 15 (Thanks to Troy Taylor for today's reflection)**

In Genesis 15, we read about a fascinating exchange between God and Abram. What it all boils down to is Abram needing to be assured that he made the correct decision to follow God into a life of wandering.

- God: *I will give you a whole nation of descendants and provide for them too.*
- Abram: *But how can I know for sure?*

God's response, a bizarre dream involving a smoking pot, a blazing torch, and dissected animals somehow convinces Abram to carry on.

This dream shows Abram a ritual that is likely part of a business deal in which two parties bind themselves together in covenant. Covenant, as contrasted to contract, is more than an exchange of goods or property; it is an exchange of people. Think, "I am yours, and you are mine." It is becoming family. Today, we could use covenant to describe a wedding, church membership, citizenship, or our relationship with God.

What a statement to back up the claim: God seals himself to Abram and shows him in a metaphor that Abram can understand: powerful, sovereign, creator God is his, and he is God's. No wonder Abram is convinced to carry on.

In this exchange, we see an amazing prayer: Abram articulates his deepest need (descendants to inherit anything else that God gives him), and his deepest fear (he is after all, homeless and vulnerable) to God. He then submits himself completely to God's promise.

Even though we may not have visions and dreams in response to our prayers (although we might), we do have stories of God's faithfulness to generations of people who depended on him for everything. God continues to use these stories to communicate his invitation in ways that we can understand. His invitation is to completely abandon our hopes, dreams and futures to God, trusting that whatever he provides is much better, bigger, and more amazing than anything we could dream up without limited perspective.

We are invited to root our story of God deeply in the truth of God's provision and protection. This provision, first offered to Abram, Isaac, and Jacob, to Moses and David, to Ruth, Naomi, and Mary, is offered to us.

Today, make an offering of prayer of your deepest fears and needs in exchange for faithful promises of a powerful, sovereign, creator God. It's a trade worth making.

*"The world is charged with the grandeur of God" (Gerard Manley Hopkins).  
 I dwell for a moment on the presence of God around me,  
 in every part of my body, and deep within my being.  
 God, I take refuge in your loving heart.  
 You are my strength in times of weakness.  
 You are my comforter in times of sorrow.  
 Lord God, I thank you for the gift of freedom.  
 Help me to use this gift with integrity.  
 I am free to make choices.  
 Help me to choose to follow you,  
 to live in a Christian way by caring for others.  
 Remind me to consider always those less fortunate than myself,  
 the oppressed, the prisoner,  
 those who are not free to worship in public.  
 Guide me always to seek your holy will in all the events of my life.  
 Amen*

### **Sunday, April 23: Genesis 16**

Life can be a roller coaster of pleasure and pain, celebration and heartache, joy and sorrow. That was certainly true in Hagar's life. And Ishmael's life. Also in Abram's and Sarai's lives.

How is Hagar feeling? Sarai gives her to her husband, Abram – that may be good (she can have the child of her master) or may be bad (she has no choice; we could call it rape). Note: **God** NEVER tells Abram and Sarai to do this, this is a scheme they conjure up all on their own. **God** is not responsible for this. Hagar gets pregnant – that's sort of good, but rather bad (she'll have a baby, but it won't be considered hers). Sarai turns on her – that's pretty bad. Abram is no help at all – that's really bad.

Hagar runs into the wilderness as an unwed, pregnant foreign woman (she is Egyptian) – that's really, really bad. How do you think Hagar feels? Betrayed? Rejected? Terrified? Angry? What else?

God never abandons Hagar. She is running away from Abram and Sarai, and probably the "God" they supposedly served who, in her mind, had gotten her into this horrendous predicament. Remember, God didn't actually command this: this was an Abram-and-Sarai-not-having-enough-faith thing.

Hagar is certainly NOT praying to God. The angel of God finds her, even in the middle of nowhere.

God promises to care for and bless Hagar and her son: *"I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count."* Her son is going to be a handful, but God promises to be with them always.

God never promises us an easy life. Things happen. Some good. Some bad. Most a bit of both. God does promise He'll never leave us. Even when we want nothing to do with Him and we are NOT praying to Him, He is always with us. He is with us even when we try to run away from Him. In Psalm 139, David writes:

*I can never escape from your Spirit.  
 I can never get away from your presence.  
 If I go up to heaven, you are there.  
 If I go down to the grave, you are there.  
 If I ride the wings of the morning,  
 if I dwell by the farthest oceans,  
 even there your hand will guide me,  
 and your strength will support me.  
 I could ask the darkness to hide me  
 and the light around me to become night –*



*but even in darkness I cannot hide from you.  
To you the night shines as bright as day.  
Darkness and light are the same to you.*

God finds us, meets us, speaks to us, and comforts us – even when we least expect (or want) Him.

*"Thereafter, Hagar used another name to refer to the Lord, who had spoken to her. She said, 'You are the God who sees me'"* (Genesis 16:13). Hagar does not use this term because she is "creeped out" that God is some divine voyeur. Rather, it is a source of encouragement to her: God sees her pain, her loneliness, her fear, her struggle, and her despair. And He is with her where she is at.

We use a variety of names to refer to God, for instance God Almighty, Lord of Hosts, Saviour, Redeemer, King of Kings, and Lord. They are all good and true biblical terms. Each of them expresses a facet of who God is. Hagar reminds us that God is also **"the God who sees me."**

God is the God who sees **you** in your circumstances – good or bad, wonderful or horrible, happy or sad. He is with you in them, always. Rejoice with Him. Cry with Him. Celebrate with Him. Mourn with Him. Be glad with Him. Seek wisdom from Him. Be forgiven by Him. Know His mercy. Know His love.

*"Be still and know that I am God."  
Lord, Your words lead me to the calmness and greatness of Your Presence.  
Everything has the potential to draw forth from me a fuller love and life.  
Yet my desires are often fixed, caught,  
on illusions of fulfillment.  
I ask that God, through my freedom,  
may orchestrate my life in a vibrant, loving melody, rich in harmony.  
I exist in a web of relationships –  
links to nature, people, God.  
I trace out these links, giving thanks for the life that flows through them.  
Some links are twisted or broken:  
I may feel regret, anger, disappointment.  
I pray for the gift of acceptance and forgiveness.  
Amen.*

## **Monday, April 24: Genesis 17**

I envy these Old Testament saints. They seem to have more "personal" encounters with God than I do. Wouldn't it be great to have the Lord physically appear to us and give us really clear instructions? Or would it? It could be rather terrifying. Notice, as well, this is not an everyday occurrence in Abram/Abraham's life – it is a once-every-few-years kind of thing.

God changes Abram's name from Abram (meaning "Exalted Father") to Abraham (meaning "Father of Many"). He changes Sarai's name from Sarai to Sarah (both mean "Princess": scholars believe "Sarai" was the version used in Ur, where they had come from, while "Sarah" is the version common in Canaan, where they have come to). These changes symbolize the past is past. They need to live now, in faith, with God.

My favourite verse in this chapter is 17:17: *"Then Abraham bowed down to the ground, but he laughed to himself in disbelief. 'How could I become a father at the age of 100?' he thought. 'And how can Sarah have a baby when she is ninety years old?'"* Abraham, this paragon of faith, has this amazing personal encounter with God, and all he can think to himself, is *"Yeah, right, God. That ain't gonna happen."* And he laughs.

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever wondered if faith really matters? Can God really do things? Does prayer make a difference? Do we ever, rather cynically, laugh to ourselves in disbelief?

How does God handle Abraham's doubt? Does He blast the poor man? Does He give up on him? God patiently works with Abraham, despite his struggles. God patiently works with us, despite our struggles, too. God never gives up on us.

Dallas Willard writes, "*God's speaking to us is intended to develop into an intelligent, freely cooperative relationship between mature people who love each other with the richness of genuine agapé (self-giving) love. We must make it our primary goal to be mature people in a loving relationship with Him.*"

You can be totally honest with God about how you are feeling. About your doubts. About your fears. About your hopes and dreams. About your need for wisdom and guidance. About your disappointments. About your aspirations. God simply wants to talk with you ... Even laugh if you need to.

*We beg you, divine Master, be our help and strength.  
Save those among us who are suffering.  
Have pity on the lowly.  
Lift up the fallen.  
Heal the sick.  
Bring back the wandering.  
Feed the hungry.  
Release those unjustly imprisoned.  
Lift up those who falter.  
Strengthen the fainthearted.  
Let all nations come to know that you are the one God,  
with your son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.  
Help us to be your people and the sheep of your pasture.  
I give thanks to God the Father, through his Son, in the Holy Spirit.  
In his great love for us, he took pity on us.  
When we were dead in our sins he brought us to life with Christ,  
so that in him we might be a new creation.  
Help me to throw off my old nature and all its ways and,  
as I have come to new birth in Christ,  
may I live for Him, today and all days.  
Amen*

Clement (92-101) and Leo (c.400-461)

## **Tuesday, April 25: Genesis 18:1-15**

It's hard to believe God sometimes. It was hard for Sarah. I'm sure it was hard for Abraham "to keep the faith," too. Their lives were tough. Their physical journey from Haran to Canaan had been disappointing. They had a disastrous time in Egypt ([Genesis 12:10-20](#)).

Their spiritual journey seemed a failure, too. When Sarah overhears God's promise of a son, she laughs, just as Abraham did. God is kidding, right? He is playing with their emotions. Surely, He is conducting some twisted psychological experiment.

Doubt was real back then. Doubt is real in 2023, too. In our modern, scientifically-shaped culture, to know something is true, we want to be able to taste, touch, see, feel, smell, and hear it. Even though modern science has only existed for the past 200+ years, one of Jesus' disciples, Thomas, was this personality type. After Jesus' resurrection, Thomas said: "*Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it*" (John 20:25). Thomas wants proof.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if Jesus showed us His hands and feet? Wouldn't it be great if God appeared to us as He did to Abraham? Wouldn't it be fantastic if the Lord were with us in a tangible way – say as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night – to prove His presence with us on our way. We can identify with

one man who came to Jesus, saying, *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief"* (Mark 9:24).

I can try to find "the answer" – a logical, tangible, prove-able solution – to my struggles. But most of the challenges I have are not the kinds of things I can "prove." They are more passionately personal questions: Is there really a God who loves me? Can I believe His promises? Is there any purpose for my life? Can I know God's love in a more personal way? I need wisdom; what do I do now?

I can know all the right things. But like Sarah – and like that man who met Jesus – in my heart, I still cry out, *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief."* That is one of the great, honest prayers we can pray.

Do you need to pray that prayer? *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief."*

*"I stand at the door and knock," says the Lord.  
What a wonderful privilege that the Lord of all creation desires to come to me.  
I welcome His presence.  
Remembering that I am in God's presence,  
I imagine Jesus himself standing or sitting beside me.  
I say whatever is on my mind,  
whatever is in my heart,  
speaking as one friend to another.  
I reflect on the presence of God always here in love,  
amidst the many things that have a hold on me.  
I pause and pray that God guide me in this precise moment.  
I pray God give me His wisdom, right now.  
I ask God to lead me, in holiness,  
peace, purity  
and joy this instant ...  
and for all eternity.  
Amen*

### **Wednesday, April 26: Genesis 18:16-33**

Sometimes life is like a tropical vacation – everything is wonderful, the seas are calm, the weather is warm, the sky is sunny, we have no stress ... In those times it is easy to imagine a gracious God smiling down on us. If we remember God at all. When life is good, we often forget all about God.

But there are other times when life seems more like an Atlantic hurricane: winds howl, the waves crash against us, the rooves of our lives are ripped off, it seems to never end ... In these times we often seek out God with the question, *"Why, God, why?" "How could You be like that?" "Help!"* All of us, at one time or other, has cried out, *"How could this happen? How could a loving God allow this?"*

As we read this story, we see Abraham struggling with painfully conflicting emotions. He is afraid of angering God by questioning His will, but more afraid of seeing his faith disintegrate before his eyes as he sees what God is about to do. He needs answers. Now.

At one time or other, we all stand precisely where Abraham is standing. Job stood there. David stood there. I stand there every time I walk with a family through a major life crisis. I stand there, every day, as I deal chronic pain. Why is life like this? Why, God, why? I love God, and want Him to go on being the God I have always thought Him to be. But I am frightened by what I see, and I am alarmed by my own need to question the Judge of the universe. And yet, fearfully, hoping that my faith can remain intact, I ask, *"Lord, how can this be? Why, God, why? Help!"*

God never turns me away when I come with my confusion and pain. But He also doesn't defend himself. I never get a clear, *"This is why ..."* answer from God. His answer is not to answer ... directly.

Sometimes I can figure out bits of the answer myself. We live in a world that has largely turned its back on God. We are surrounded by evil, sin, and pain, as people choose to inflict pain on others, do stupid things, or just happen to have accidents. In a world with freedom of choice, marred by sin, bad things happen. I can't blame God when people do hurtful things to others. I can't blame God when a person makes a mistake and causes an accident. In a fallen world, I can't blame God when a body gets sick.

Other times God does answer, but not by telling me why. More often He answers by showing me more of Himself than I have ever seen before. He rises above the pain. My fear and anger morph into awe and worship. Like Abraham, I discover God is God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. Like Hagar, I discover God is the One who sees me. What I need is not a reason why, but a bigger, better appreciation and understanding of who God is – here, now. I don't need an answer, I need God. The real God.

God is with us, even in the hurricanes of our lives. God is with us in our suffering. The same God who wept when Lazarus died, the same God who cried out in anguish before the crucifixion, the same God who suffered the humiliation, degradation, and agony of Calvary, the same God who overcame the grave, stands with us in our struggles. He has been there and done that. He suffers with us. And He gets us through.

God is still the loving, gracious God we always knew. His arms are open to us ... We can never hope to understand God fully, but we can have confidence that God is faithful. As we weep, he weeps. He will be with us to strengthen us, to give us hope, and to sustain us no matter how nasty the storms.

*Help us, O Lord, to know you,  
and love you,  
and rejoice in you.  
Even though we know we cannot do these perfectly in this life,  
let us, at least, grow closer to you every day,  
till we come to know, love, and rejoice in you in perfection, in heaven.  
May our knowledge of you increase in us, day by day.  
May our love for you grow every day more and more.  
May our joy become greater and fuller as we live in your presence each day.  
May the gifts of grace you give us fill us so that our joy may be full.  
To you, O Lord, be the honor and glory,  
who with the Father and Holy Spirit lives and reigns,  
one God, world without end.  
Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

#### **Thursday, April 27: Genesis 21:1-21**

Does God keep His promises? What was Abraham and Sarah's experience? Yes. But it may take a while. So be patient, very patient. Patience is one of the more challenging fruits of the Spirit in [Galatians 5:22-23](#).

Now consider Hagar and Ishmael. Does God answer prayer? Does God keep His promises? Yes. But maybe not in the way we might think (or like). So be flexible. God may have some surprises in store.

We often say that, when it comes to prayer, God typically answers:

- Yes.
- No.
- Wait.

There is some good wisdom in that insight. But in my experience, the answers are often not that clear. I have rarely heard God explicitly say to me, "Yes," or "No," or "Wait."

Instead, sometimes

- I have seen things work out the way I hope.



- or not work out in the way I wished.
- or I wait, and wait, and wait, and have no clear direction at all. There is no answer. Ever.

Like Abraham and Sarah, I need to learn patience (that is SO hard for me).

Like Hagar and Ishmael, I have to trust that God will open up a way forward, even when it seems like the water is gone and I'm wandering aimlessly in the wilderness. God is there, even in the desert places of life.

The full list of fruit of the Spirit includes: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those are all challenging virtues. I need to pray that God would help me cultivate all these qualities in my life ...

*I ask God's help to be free from my own preoccupations,  
to be open to God in this time of prayer,  
to come to love and serve him more.  
How am I really feeling?  
Lighthearted? Heavy-hearted?  
I may be very much at peace, happy to be here.  
Equally, I may be frustrated, worried or angry.  
I acknowledge how I really am.  
It is the real me that the Lord loves.  
Jesus, You always welcomed little children when you walked on this earth.  
Teach me to have a childlike trust in you.  
To live in the knowledge that You will never abandon me.  
Amen*

### **Friday, April 28: Genesis 22:1-18**

We celebrate Abraham as a hero of faith. And rightly so. In faith, he left his home in Haran and travelled to Canaan. In faith, he and Sarah waited for their son to be born. And now, in faith, he is willing to obey God's commands, even though that could mean killing that long-promised, long-awaited son, the fulfillment of all of God's promises, and their only hope for the future. If Isaac were to die, what of God's great promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations? How could that possibly come about? But Abraham is obedient. In faith, Abraham trusts that God will provide a solution.

At the last-minute, God provides a way out. And God rewards Abraham's faithfulness. "*Abraham named the place Yahweh-Yireh (which means 'the Lord will provide').*"

How would you have handled this? I would not have done well. (Just wondering: what would have happened if Abraham had just said, "*No. Sorry. Not doing that ...*")

*Aside: as Christians, think about the foreshadowing of Jesus in the story of Abraham and Isaac. God is the Father. We are the child. Unlike Isaac, we deserve to die. We deserve the Father's wrath and punishment. But God offers His Son, Jesus, as a sacrifice, to take our place. He is the spotless lamb/ram who dies in our place. We are saved by the blood of the perfect lamb/ram – Jesus. The Lord has provided. Amazingly.*

Abraham is only now finding himself where Hagar has found herself twice before – facing the imminent death of her only child and having to depend completely on God for salvation. We often overlook Hagar, but she is a hero of faith, too. She lives "*the Lord will provide*" day by day, in total dependence on God.

How do I need to learn that "*the Lord will provide*"? God has always provided the essentials throughout my life (thankfully not always just in the nick of time). As I look back I can see example after example of His faithfulness. But I still struggle right now, today (Friday, April 28, 2023), to have faith and to live in faith that "*the Lord will provide.*"

Lord, I believe. Help me in my unbelief ...

*Lord of the impossible, I come to you with an open heart.  
I want to be honest and truthful with you.  
I expose my life, I share with you my need.  
Please glorify yourself through all the situations and problems I will face today.  
And thank you for caring about my prayers.  
Amen.*

Joni Eareckson Tada (1949- )

## **Saturday, April 29: Genesis 28**

Abraham's son, Isaac, has twin sons. The older is Esau, the younger, Jacob. In the years to come, Jacob swindles his older brother out of his birthright (the honour and double portion of the inheritance that comes from being the firstborn). With his mother's help, Jacob also steals their father's blessing from Esau. Jacob (and his mother, Rebekah) are deceitful, conniving people. They sin. Over and over.

**Lesson 1: Trust.** Did Jacob change history by stealing Esau's birthright and blessing? Has he managed to receive what should have been Esau's thanks to his own sharp wits? No. God was planning to bless the world through Jacob anyway. Jacob could have known the pure joy of being blessed AND kept his family.

Instead, Jacob creates (dis)stress by stealing from his brother. He destroys his relationship with his closest relative (Esau wants to kill Jacob in [Genesis 27:41](#)). He carries a huge burden of guilt and fear. It didn't have to be this way. God was going to bless him anyway. Sometimes we try too hard.

**Lesson #2: God is God.** The image of "Jacob's Ladder" is intriguing. It emphasizes a connectedness we can feel in relation to God. God is not some impersonal being "way out there." We know Him personally and powerfully through the person and presence of the Holy Spirit. However, there still is a categorical difference between us and God. This dream highlights that God is God. I am NOT God. There is a world of difference between us. We live in a tension between

- a sense of *radical connectedness with God* – knowing and loving God as our intimate friend and in His indwelling personal presence as Holy Spirit, and
- a profound sense of *incomprehensible distance from God* – finding ourselves at the foot of the ladder, aware of the awesomeness and glory of Almighty God: Creator, Sustainer, Judge, and King.

**Lesson #3: (Baby) Steps of faith.** Our life with God often has milestones along the way. We all have times when something happens – good or bad – and we discover the power, glory, and grace of God in special ways. We sometimes mark these times with baptism, rededication, or other symbolic action. Those are good things. Important things. People in the Bible are often setting up stones or building altars to commemorate special encounters with God. How can we mark significant moments well?

**Life Lesson 4: God is with you.** "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it." (Genesis 28:16). That is the reality of our lives. God is in "this place" – whatever and wherever "this place" is for you (wherever you are physically, spiritually, emotionally, relationally). Are you aware of it?

Jacob's final vow (28:20-22) shows how he is struggling to come to terms with this. He isn't sure yet God will provide for him. But God's promise is "I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go ... I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you." When will His promise be finished? Never.

God's promise to **you** is "I am with **you**, and I will protect **you** wherever you go ... I will not leave **you** until I have finished giving **you** everything I have promised **you**." When will His promise be finished? Never.

*Lord, help me to be fully alive to your holy presence.  
 Enfold me in your love.  
 Let my heart become one with yours.  
 When I am invited into the presence of a friend,  
 I look forward to the event and feel honoured.  
 When God invites me to spend time in His presence,  
 He desires me to know and feel His love.  
 With faith and hope I turn my heart and mind to God.  
 I ask Him to help me become more aware of His loving presence.  
 Lord, grant me the grace to be free from the excesses of this life.  
 Let me not get caught up with the desire for wealth.  
 Keep my heart and mind free to love and serve you.  
 Amen.*

### **Sunday, April 30: Genesis 32:22-32**

In C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, wise old Mr. and Mrs. Beaver are talking with two young girls about the great Lion, Aslan (who is the Jesus/God character).

- One of the kids, Susan, asks, *"Is He – quite safe?"*
- Mrs. Beaver replies, *"If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."*
- *"Then He isn't safe?"* concludes Lucy.
- *"Safe?"* said Mr. Beaver. *"Who said anything about safe? Of course He isn't safe. But He's good. He's the King."*

Is God "safe"? Of course, God isn't safe. But He's good. Good beyond measure. He's the King.

Theologian Rudolf Otto uses the word "*numinous*" to describe those times when we experience God in a way that is magnificent, overwhelming, and awe-inspiring. He is completely "other" to us. He is Almighty God. God is good – incredibly, amazingly good. But He is definitely not "safe," tame-able, or control-able.

In this story, Jacob meets God in an unexpected way as he returns home to make peace with his estranged brother, Esau (whom he cheated and swindled). It is one of those "numinous" encounters.

Jacob wrestles with God. This little battle is a microcosm of Jacob's entire life. Jacob is always fighting and scrapping to get his way. To quote Frank Sinatra, Jacob wants *"To do it MY way."*

How do things go for Jacob? Through his life choices he's hurt himself. He's destroyed his relationship with his father and brother. Anything he gains is what God was going to give him anyway. All he has to show for his struggles are broken relationships and a limp. He could have had it all AND had a good relationship with God and with his family. As it is, all his conniving has earned him is heartache, pain, and suffering.

Jacob's first encounter with God ([Genesis 28](#), yesterday) took place as he left the Promised Land. This happened when he left, to escape from Esau's anger. Today's story takes place as Jacob returns, years later. It will begin a new chapter in his life as he tries to reconcile with the brother he wronged.

These two encounters with God surround the time Jacob spent away from God, physically and spiritually. It took many, many years for Jacob to acknowledge God's sovereignty and goodness. The cost is significant: he destroyed his relationship with his only brother, Esau. And he leaves this meeting with God with a limp; a physical disability symbolising his dependency on God from now on.

Jacob is renamed "*Israel*" – literally "*he struggles with God*" – an apt moniker. The people of Israel, Jacob and his offspring, are referred to as "*stiff-necked people*" 18 times in the Old Testament. Stephen, the first

Christian martyr, says to the Jewish people who continue to resist God's love in Jesus: *"You stiff-necked people. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit."* Jacob made a career of that.

Lots of people struggle with God. Lord, help me not be one of them. Lord, help me NOT to be stiff-necked. Lord, help me to NOT resist your Spirit.

*Lord, grant me the grace to have freedom in your Spirit.  
Cleanse my heart and soul so I may live joyously in Your love.  
I ask for the grace to be free of my own preoccupations.  
May I be open to what God may be saying to me.  
May the Holy Spirit enlighten my mind and my heart to respond to His teachings.  
To love His truth.  
To love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength.  
To love my neighbour as myself.  
Lord, here am I. Send me.  
Amen*

### **Monday, May 1: Genesis 35:1-15**

Sometimes we need to meet God again. To confess our sins. To pick up the pieces. To start over.

Jacob reconciles with Esau ([Genesis 33](#)). But then things go sideways. His daughter, Dinah, is raped by the son of a local Canaanite warlord ([Genesis 34](#)). Two of Jacob's sons take the law into their own hands. They slaughter **all** the men in the Canaanite city. Jacob's sons gleefully, *"plundered the town ... They seized all the flocks and herds and donkeys – everything they could lay their hands on, both inside the town and outside in the fields. They looted all their wealth and plundered their houses. They also took all their little children and wives and led them away as captives"* (Genesis 34:27-29). They sin. Understandably, Jacob is afraid for his life from the people of the surrounding cities. This is when God tells him to move to Bethel.

*"Bethel,"* which literally means *"the house of God,"* is a significant location in God's story with His people. Originally named Luz, this is the place Abraham first pitched his tent when he came from Haran ([Genesis 12:8](#)). After a disastrous sojourn in Egypt, Abraham returned to this spot ([Genesis 13:3](#)). Here Jacob had his vision of the ladder to heaven. This is when he renames this place "Bethel" ([Genesis 28:19](#)).

Now, God tells Jacob to return again to Bethel, the place where he first met God. Bethel is a holy place. A place to meet God. After the disastrous confrontation of Jacob's sons with the locals, God is calling Jacob's family to repentance. They need to change their clothes. This is symbolic. They need to put aside their old ways and choose a new way of living. More importantly they are to bury anything that related to the worship of foreign gods. The implication is that some of Jacob's family have been worshipping the local gods of the Canaanites (probably among the loot the boys brought home from their bloody sortie).

At Bethel, Jacob builds an altar to commemorate the place where he first met God. He is again named *"Israel"* – *"he who struggles with God"* – by God. Here, now, Jacob and his clan must examine themselves, put away other gods once and for all, let go of their stiff-necked stubborn independence, and trust God. After decades of struggling with God, Jacob/Israel must demonstrate faith – true faith.

The writer of Hebrews urges us, *"let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith"* (Hebrews 12:1-2). That sounds easy. It is SO hard to do.

Pray God would help you to keep the faith. *"For the joy set before him he (Jesus) endured the cross, scorned its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart"* (Hebrews 12:2-3). Spend some time in prayer.



*God, I never knew You lived so close to the floor,  
but every time I am bowed down,  
crushed by this weight of grief,  
I feel Your hand on my head,  
Your breath on my cheek,  
Your tears on my neck.  
You never tell me to pull myself together,  
to stem the flow of many years.  
You simply stay by my side  
for as long as it takes,  
so close to the floor.  
Amen*

Sheila Walsh (1956 - )

## **Tuesday, May 2: Exodus 3:1-17**

Is it OK to ask God hard questions?

Abraham questioned God (Genesis 18:16-33). Jacob wrestled with God (Genesis 32:22-32). Now Moses argues with God. Is it OK to ask God hard questions? You bet. It seems to be a pattern among people who really want to know God.

Of course, when we ask God difficult questions, we may or may not always like the answer. Jacob ended up with a limp. Moses (as we'll see tomorrow), almost ends up being sidelined by his brother, Aaron.

**Note:** God knows and care for His people – always. Annoyingly, He is not always in a hurry to act in the way **we** want to solve our problems. The situation is this: the Israelites are now slaves in Egypt. They've been crying out to God for generations. Finally, God is acting. Why has it taken so long? We don't know. There is tremendous mystery about why/when/how/where/in what way God acts. He rarely explains Himself. We simply need to be patient. And keep the faith. That's tough ...

**Note as well:** God is GOD. We sometimes have a rather "small" view of who God is. We try to understand him in human terms. In our minds, He should look like us, talk like us, and (more importantly) think like us, and act like us. This passage challenges us to see God in a much BIGGER way. To be in His presence is to be in the presence of the Deliverer. He is good. But He is definitely not safe. To be in His presence is to be in the presence of the one who **IS** the ultimate everything ( "*I am who I am*" ).

To be in His presence may be to be in the presence of One who will change you. To be in His presence may be to be in the presence of One calls you to be someone and to do something. To be in His presence is to stand on holy ground. Remove your shoes. (For a great video presentation of this passage, check out the scene in the movie, *The Prince of Egypt*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ds9y3lJGig>).

When we pray, we come into the presence of this ALMIGHTY God. He may challenge us. He may change us. He may give us something to do. We may never be the same again. Are we ready for that? Really?

When we pray, we come into the presence of the ultimate **I AM**. Are we ready for that? He is good – incredibly good. But He is not safe. Are we ready for that?

(*In depth aside:* This is when God reveals His name to Moses, in Hebrew "YHWH" – "*I am*" from the verb "to be." In biblical Hebrew, you never say "**I am walking** ..." you always say, "*I walk* ..." because the words "*I am*" are too holy to say. In the Bible texts, the word "YHWH" is often used in printed texts to name God, but whenever Jewish people read the Scriptures aloud, they substitute the word "*Adonai*," which means "*Lord*." In our Bible translations, the word "YHWH" is routinely translated by the capital letters "**LORD**." If your Bible does that, whenever you see "**LORD**" the actual Hebrew word is "YHWH" – "*I AM*")

*Lord God, you are everything to me.  
My spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.  
Thank you for seeking me when I was lost and for finding me.  
Thank you for enabling me to bear fruit for you, Lord.  
Without you, I can do nothing.*

*You are good, O Lord, and you are always ready to forgive.  
Thank you for your plentiful mercy in my life  
which I always receive when I call upon you.  
You are always there to help me;  
therefore, I will never be confounded.  
You truly are a very present help to me,  
and I am receiving your help even now as I pray.  
Thank you, Father.*

*You are my refuge and strength, and because this is true,  
I will not fear anything or anyone.  
You are in my midst, and I will not be moved.  
You are always there to help me speedily.  
You are with me, Lord.  
Knowing this, I will be still.  
I know that you are my God.  
Thank you for your constant help in my life, Lord.  
Amen*

### **Wednesday, May 3: Exodus 4:1-17**

Excuses. How good at you at coming up with excuses? Moses is doing a pretty good job ...

How does God handle Moses' attempts to excuse himself? At the end of the day, what is the result?

Remember Jonah? Jonah tried to excuse himself, too. He tried to run away from God and God's call on his life. How did that work out? Jonah ended up in a hurricane, thrown overboard, swallowed by a fish, and vomited up on a beach. He ended up doing the task God had originally called him to do, anyway.

Jesus tells this parable: *"A man prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations. When the banquet was ready, he sent his servant to tell the guests, 'Come, the banquet is ready.' But they all began making excuses. One said, 'I have just bought a field and must inspect it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I have just bought five pairs of oxen, and I want to try them out. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' Lots of great excuses.*

*"The servant returned and told his master what they had said. His master was furious and said, 'Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' After the servant had done this, he reported, 'There is still room for more.' So his master said, 'Go out into the country lanes and behind the hedges and urge anyone you find to come, so that the house will be full. For none of those I first invited will get even the smallest taste of my banquet'" (Luke 14:16-24).*

What do the excuse-people miss out on? A party. God's blessing. New life in Jesus. Ouch.

Benjamin Franklin once remarked, *"He that is good at making excuses is seldom good for anything else."* Similarly, Florence Nightingale said, *"I attribute my success to this: I never gave or took an excuse."*

Who is God inviting you to be? What is He inviting you to say? What is He inviting you to do? Go for it ...

*Make us glad, Lord God, in speaking boldly of your mercies.  
Help us rejoice, O Lord, in adoring your Holiness.  
May our chief joy be to glorify and proclaim your holy Name.  
Almighty, everlasting God, dwelling in love and power in our souls,  
bring people to your light through us.  
Make yourself known to the world in us.  
May all people know the true Light, the bright and morning Star.  
We pray that you would fill the world with your glory  
and show yourself by the radiance of your light to all nations.  
To you be the glory forever and ever.  
Amen*

Gregorian Sacramentary (c.593)

#### **Thursday, May 4: Exodus 13:1-16**

Being thankful is a good discipline.

God wants Moses and the Israelites to remember His miraculous deliverance from Egypt. He knows how easy it is for us to forget His blessings. He calls them to remember. And to be thankful as a discipline.

What has God done in your life? In the lives of people you know?

Be thankful. Count your blessings. Celebrate what God has done.

Our prayers can become "a never-ending shopping list" of things we want (check out Larry Matthews' song of the same name: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGpFs5JwgFg>). Sometimes it is good for us to step back and simply be thankful. Truly grateful. It is an interesting discipline to cultivate in our lives.

God may not have delivered you from slavery in Egypt, but He has done some amazing things in your life.

One wise person once said, "*Gratitude consists of being more aware of what you have, than what you don't.*" Spend some time today remembering God's goodness. Thank Him for His grace and mercy. Enjoy simply being grateful ...

*Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.  
Loving Creator,  
We asked for strength, and you gave us difficulties to make us strong.  
We asked for wisdom, and you gave us problems to solve.  
We asked for prosperity, and you gave us purpose and brains to use.  
We asked for courage, and you gave us fears to overcome.  
We asked for patience, and you gave us situations where we were forced to wait.  
We asked for love, and you gave us troubled people to help.  
We asked for justice, and you called us to be just and to lead with integrity.  
Lord, we have received nothing that we asked for or wanted.  
And yet, we received everything that we needed.  
For this, we give thanks.*

Colleen Hanycz

#### **Friday, May 5: Exodus 15:1-21**

God does deliver His people from Egypt. This is the Israelites' response.

Have you ever tried to write out a prayer?

Have you ever actually **written down** what God means to you, personally? Have you ever taken pen to

paper (or keyboard to computer, or finger tap to tablet) and put into print what God has done in your life?

It's an interesting discipline to do. Try it. You don't have to share it with anyone. You don't have to make it public. It is good for you to actually see in print (or on a screen) how amazingly well God has cared for you.

Try it today ...

*Thank you, Lord, for the blessings you have bestowed on my life.  
You have provided me with more than I could ever have imagined.  
You have surrounded me with people who always look out for me.  
You have given me family and friends who bless me every day with kind words and actions.  
They lift me up in ways that keep my eyes focused on you and make my spirit soar.*

*Thank you, Lord, for keeping me safe.  
You protect me from evil.  
You provide me with advisors to help me with life's difficult decisions.  
You speak to me in so many ways so that I always know you are here.*

*Lord, I am so grateful for keeping those around me safe and loved.  
Please provide me with the ability and sense to show them every day how much they matter.  
Please give me the ability to give to them the same kindness they have provided to me.*

*I am so extremely grateful for all of your blessings in my life, Lord.  
I pray that you remind me of just how blessed I am.  
May I never forget to show my gratitude in prayer and returned acts of kindness.  
Thank you, Lord.*

Kelli Mahoney

## **Saturday, May 6: Exodus 17:1-7**

I preached a sermon which ended with the challenge (more or less): *"If you can't say anything nice about someone, don't say anything at all."* Monday morning, I got an earful from one person about all the things that were wrong with the sermon, the service, the church, etc., etc., etc. Hmmm ...

God has just delivered the Israelites from brutal back-breaking, brick-making slavery in Egypt. He has miraculously provided food and water in the desert. And yet people still grumble. And complain. And belly-ache. *"Massah"* (which means "test") and *"Meribah"* (which means "arguing") become synonymous for the Israelites' stubbornness, ongoing rebellion against God, and persistent lack of faith ([Psalm 81](#), [95](#), [106](#)).

What about me? What do I grumble and complain about? What do I belly-ache about?

In Philippians 4, Paul writes, *"Don't worry about anything; instead, **pray** about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done."* (This is what we have been learning, isn't it?) Why? *"Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus."* Isn't that awesome?

There is a profound peace that comes when we turn things over to God in prayer. And we let go.

*"And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing,"* Paul adds. *"Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise."* In other words, stop grumbling. Stop complaining. And rejoice in good things. Celebrate the beauty in the world around you. Count your blessings. You will find you have a way better attitude toward life. You will have a better attitude about other people.

Other people will like you a lot more, too. (I appreciate positive people so much more than grumpy ones)



*Loving Lord,  
 As I express my gratitude to you in prayer, may it be a pleasing, joyful sound to you.  
 Thank you, Lord, for your love.  
 It brings me acceptance and significance.  
 Thank you, Lord, for your truth.  
 It brings me guidance and direction.  
 Thank you, Lord, for your mercy.  
 It brings me help and comfort.  
 Thank you, Lord, for your faithfulness.  
 It brings me stability and strength.  
 Thank you, Lord, for your beauty displayed in the earth.  
 It brings me joy and delight.  
 Thank you, Lord, for your way of redemption – the cross.  
 It brings me salvation and regeneration.  
 In all things, I give thanks.  
 Amen*

Beth McLendon

### **Sunday, May 7: Exodus 32**

We all make mistakes. The issue is not whether we make mistakes, but how we handle them when we do. Do we admit them? Do we deny them? Do we try to excuse them? Or do we repent?

Are we willing to change our behavior, so we don't keep on doing the same thing over and over?

The people of Israel, who had been miraculously led by a pillar of fire/cloud, who had miraculously crossed the Red Sea, and who miraculously had daily provision of food and water, apparently don't trust God. And they don't really want to worship Him. They want a god they can see, touch, and feel. Other nations had physical "gods," represented by carved statues. Typically, these gods were either linked with the forces of nature – sun, moon, thunder – or gods associated with fertility – like calves and young women. The Israelites don't have a physical "god" whose image is as cool as the peoples around them. They want a physical, tangible, statuesque god, just like everyone else.

When Moses confronts Aaron with their idolatry, how does Aaron handle his mistakes? Aaron makes excuses. He takes no responsibility. He certainly doesn't acknowledge the error of his ways. After all, the Israelites are having a great party.

Is this a mature way to handle a mistake? What should Aaron have done?

When John the Baptist comes, we read, *"His message was, 'Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.' ... People from Jerusalem and from all of Judea and all over the Jordan Valley went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.*

*"But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees (the "Israelites" of his era) coming to watch him baptize, he denounced them. 'Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don't just say to each other, "We're safe, for we are descendants of Abraham." That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire'" (Matthew 3:1-10).*

God takes sin seriously. The best way to handle our mistakes is to confess them, to repent, and to change our way from that point on. This is what Aaron **should** have done.

As we repent, confess our sin, and put our faith in Jesus, He forgives us completely. We are saved from any judgement. That is great news. *"If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in*

the truth," John writes. "But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness" (1 John 1:8-9). Through Jesus we are completely forgiven. Celebrate that in prayer today ...

*Lord Jesus Christ,  
You are the lamb of God;  
you take away the sins of the world.  
You chose to be called the friend of sinners.  
By your saving death and resurrection  
free me from my sins.  
Through the grace of the Holy Spirit  
restore me to friendship with your Father.  
Cleanse me from every stain of sin  
and raise me to new life for the glory of your name.  
May your peace take root in my heart,  
and bring forth a harvest of love, holiness, and truth.  
Amen.*

### **Monday, May 8: Exodus 33:12-23**

The lyrics to the song, *In the Secret*, go, "I want to know You. I want to hear Your voice. I want to know You more. I want to touch You. I want to see Your face. I want to know You more." ([Watch the video](#))

Moses wants to know God. In the Old Testament, before the time of Jesus, this was a risky proposition. God is not always "safe." Perhaps knowing God is more risky than we appreciate. After all, who is God?

Ask yourself: Who is God?

- ***Sometimes we treat God like a buddy.*** We may ask Him for advice now and then, but generally we do our own thing and don't pay Him a lot of attention. BUT God is the Creator and Sustainer of every galaxy in our universe (and other potential universes). There are at least one hundred billion galaxies in the observable universe (recent research suggest there may be ten times that amount). Our galaxy, alone, contains at least 100 thousand million stars. God, the Creator, is astounding. Amazing. Stupendous. We ought to take His knowledge and wisdom VERY seriously ...
- ***Sometimes we fashion God in our own image.*** Since I know what *I* want to do and what *I* like, God must like and approve the same things, right? Since *I* am drawn to particular political views, God must share those views, right? Since *I* prefer a particular approach to worship, God must like that same thing, right? BUT could God, who created everything to work together so well, actually be smarter than *me*? Am I open to the possibility that *I* might be wrong ...?
- ***Sometimes, like Nietzsche, Hitchens, or Dawkins, we don't believe God exists.*** (We may not actually say that, but it's how we live). If I don't believe in Him, He isn't real, right? BUT, I may choose not believe the force of gravity exists either, but simply denying its existence won't work out well when I trip on the stairs. Just because I may not believe in God doesn't mean God doesn't exist either. His existence is completely independent of my belief/unbelief.

As people who know God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, we have lost some of the awe and mystery that Old Testament people, like Moses, had in God's presence. In some ways, that's a good thing. Awe and "fear" of the Lord (in the sense of reverence and deep respect) can become abject terror. We can avoid God because He seems too scary. In other ways, losing that awe-factor is not so good. We can trivialize God to the point that he is no more important in our lives than our financial advisor or favourite YouTuber. God can become a buddy who offers advice we can safely choose to ignore.

It is great that, through prayer, we can speak directly with God. That's fantastic. But it is always good for us to keep the balance between what theologians call God's **immanence** (His present-with-me-right-now-through-the-Spirit personal relationship and reality) and God's **transcendence** (His God-Almighty-King-of-Creation-way-above-and-beyond-me reality) in tension. Both are true.

In prayer, I can celebrate that I am welcome into God's presence – always. He is my **loving Father**.

In prayer, I can also remind myself that God is **ALMIGHTY GOD**. He is Creator. King. All wisdom. All powerful. God doesn't just give us a bit more helpful advice: His truth is Truth (with a capital "T"). I need to hear Him. I need to obey Him.

*When I am invited into the presence of a friend,  
I look forward to the event and feel honoured.  
When God invites me to spend time in His presence,  
He desires me to know and feel His love.  
With faith and hope I turn my heart and mind to God,  
and ask Him to help me become more aware of His loving presence.*

*"A thick and shapeless tree-trunk would never believe that it could become a statue,  
admired as a miracle of sculpture, and would never submit itself to the chisel of the sculptor,  
who sees by her genius what she can make of it." (Ignatius)  
I ask for the grace to let myself be shaped by my loving Creator.  
I thank God for these few moments spent alone with him  
and for any insights I may have been given from His Word.  
Amen.*

## **Tuesday, May 9: Exodus 34:1-8**

The God to whom we pray is **GOD**. In the Old Testament, God is known by all sorts of descriptive names. Just a few of them include:

- I AM (Yahweh),
- Lord,
- Most High God,
- Lord God Almighty,
- The Everlasting God,
- The Lord Will Provide,
- The God Who Sees You,
- The Lord Who Heals You,
- The Lord Our Banner,
- The Lord Who Sanctifies Us,
- The Lord Is Peace,
- The Lord of Hosts,
- God Our Shepherd,
- The Lord Our Righteousness,
- The Lord Who Is There,
- Our Fortress,
- Our Rock,
- Our Deliverer,
- Our Refuge,
- King of Kings.

We could go on and on (flip through the Psalms and notice all the different words used to describe God).

As we mentioned yesterday, God is an AWESOME God (in the literal sense of inspiring AWE and wonder). It's good for us to reflect on God's greatness now and then.

Reflecting on God's majesty, power, and holiness can lead us to despair. He is SO amazing and so pure. We aren't. Why should He notice us? Why shouldn't He zap us? I was talking with one student who struggled with the vastness of the universe and how small she was. How could God even know the Earth existed, let alone her? How could the God of this HUGE creation care about little her? She was having a crisis of faith.

The wonder of God, however, is that He is **BOTH** the Almighty God of the Galaxies **AND** the God who knows each of us intimately. He is **BOTH** the Pure, Holy, Perfect One **AND** the One who can deal with, forgive, and heal us with each of our personal imperfection, sin, and messiness.

In fact, it is only BECAUSE God is so far above and beyond His creation that He CAN forgive, heal, and restore us. Only the Creator can save His creation.

Celebrate the wonder-full (full of wonder) reality that Almighty God loves you. The King of Creation forgives you. The King of Kings redeems you. The Lord of All embraces you. Praise Him.

*Worthy of praise from every mouth,  
of confession from every tongue,  
of worship from every creature,  
is Your glorious Name, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
You have created the whole world in your grace.  
By your compassion, you have saved the world.  
To your Majesty, O God,  
ten thousand times ten thousand bow down and adore,  
singing and praising without ceasing, and saying,  
'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts;  
heaven and earth are full of your praises.  
Hosanna in the highest.'  
May my heart and my voice worship you  
in Spirit and in truth today, too, O my God.  
I love you, Lord.  
Amen*

Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389)

### **Wednesday, May 10: Job 1**

We cannot wrestle with prayer – communicating with and knowing God – without meeting Job. Job is a godly, godly man. The author repeatedly emphasizes Job *"was blameless – a man of complete integrity; he feared God and stayed away from evil"* (1:1, 8, 2:3). But Job suffers terribly. Bad things happen from natural disasters (*"The fire of God has fallen from heaven"* – a volcano? Lightning? (1:16) and a wind storm/hurricane/ tornado (1:19)) to raids by neighbouring tribes (1:15, 17). At the end of the day, Job loses his family and his property. He loses everything.

During these tragedies, Job struggles with God, with prayer. The author of the book comments that *"in all of this, Job did not sin by blaming God"* (1:22). But I'm sure he had lots of questions.

We would like to think that good and evil are simple to figure out. Good people have good things happen to them. Bad people have bad things happen to them. Therefore, if good things are happening to you, you must be a good person. Conversely, if bad things are happening to you, you must be a bad person. Applying this to Job, since bad things are happening to him, he must be a bad person, right? Job needs to pray, confess, and repent. Job's friends, who show up later, think just like this.

The book of Job shows us this is far too simplistic. As Solomon muses in Ecclesiastes: *"I have seen everything in this meaningless life, including the death of good young people and the long life of wicked people ... In this life, good people are often treated as though they were wicked, and wicked people are often treated as though they were good"* (Ecclesiastes 7:15, 8:14). Reality is messy.

In Job, there are no trite answers. However, the author does give us a glimpse into some of the "unseen powers" at work. There is more going on than we may always see or know directly. The author introduces us to *"the satan"* (in Job, the word *"satan"* is always preceded by the definite article, *"the"*). *"Satan,"* in Hebrew, literally means *"accuser"* or *"adversary"*; it's a vocation (albeit a nasty one), not a proper name.

Without getting caught up in the details, we see Job's suffering has more to do with the nasty scheme of a malevolent unseen power than anything Job has (or has not) done. God allows these evils to happen. He



does not cause them. Job's pain is NOT a consequence of his personal sin or bad choices. Good= blessing and bad= cursing is far too simplistic. It would be cruel to say such a thing to Job. And totally wrong.

While the book of Job does not give us easy answers, it does help us see (1) evil and suffering are more complicated than we might imagine, and (2) there is no simplistic relationship between our actions and blessings/curses. We also learn (3) God is very aware of and cares about what's going on in our lives, and (4) while we may struggle with why God allows suffering, ultimately He has total power over evil.

*"Nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 8:38-39).

As we pray through the hard things in our lives, know that God cares, more deeply than we can imagine. And be encouraged – He is still God Almighty. Be thankful for your blessings and bring your requests and prayers for others to Him ...

*We thank you, O God for your love for us.  
Love that reaches out to accept us,  
wherever we are, whoever we are.  
Love that demands a lot,  
but at the same time, somehow, amazingly, enables us to meet those demands.  
Love that reassures, affirms, prompts, challenges,  
and overwhelms us with the completeness of its response.  
Help us, your people, held within the security of your love,  
to risk showing that same love to others.  
May our love, too, be known for its abundance,  
its readiness to speak out,  
and its healing power.  
Amen*

Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand

## **Thursday, May 11: Job 2**

Just when you think life couldn't get any worse, it does. Has that ever been your experience? If so, you're not alone. Job has been there and done that, too. Through it all, he keeps praying and talking with God.

However, Job's situation is a bit unique. We have insight into the reality that, in Job's very specific case, the issue is a "contest" of sorts between the accuser/challenger (Hebrew *"the satan"*) and Job. This is not presented as "normal" human experience, thankfully. This is a specific case study.

In this case, the accuser is trying to show that human beings (you and I) are not worth God's trouble. This is NOT a contest between Job and God; God is not sending this heartache on Job (although He does allow it). It is NOT a contest between God and the challenger, in which Job is simply a pawn. Rather the evil one is going directly after Job. He believes Job only loves God because God has blessed him. If you take away Job's blessings, he will walk away from God. Is that what our relationship with God is all about? Do we only love God when things go well for us?

In a simplistic *because-I-love-God-He-will-bless-me* and *if-I-don't-love-God-He'll-curse-me* kind of world, this makes perfect sense. If Job believed that tit-for-tat theology, the fact that bad things are happening to him could only mean that He has sinned terribly. And if God has abandoned him, he should abandon God. Job's wife believes that. She urges Job to walk away from God. What is Job's response?

As we shall see over the next few days, Job's relationship with God is complicated. What is apparent is that

1. there are nasty forces in the world (the book of Revelation gives us more insight into the demonic source of these forces. Job simply takes them for granted).
2. Although God gives the evil powers more freedom than we might like, they are still, ultimately, under His control.
3. God does bless us with many good things, but can allow unpleasant things to happen, too. There is a contained freedom in the world that permits bad things to occur. There is not always a clear correlation between our behaviour and our blessings/problems.

In the New Testament, we're reminded that both good and bad things happen to people who love God. Our calling is to remain faithful, whatever our circumstances: *"Even if you suffer for doing what is right, God will reward you for it. So don't worry or be afraid of their threats. Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ. Remember, it is better to suffer for doing good, if that is what God wants, than to suffer for doing wrong"* (1 Peter 3:14-17).

Good ... bad ... whatever is going on in your life is not a direct reflection of your relationship with God. Life just happens. In the midst of all of this, we are called to *"worship Christ as Lord of your life."*

May the Lord give us the grace, endurance, strength, and patience to keep the faith.

*Jesus, You who called me to hope in your Name,  
which is the first of all creation,  
open the eyes of my heart that I may know you,  
who alone remains highest among the highest and holiest among the holy.  
And open my arms that I may live for you  
with generosity, mercy, and love.  
Even when life is hard, help me be joyful in you.  
May your love for me be reflected in my love for those around me.  
Amen*

Clement of Rome (1<sup>st</sup> Century)

### **Friday, May 12: Job 3**

Job is not happy. That's no surprise. It's good for us to know that when bad things happen to us, we don't have to try to paste a fake smile on our faces and pretend things are wonderful.

We can be brutally honest with God about our rawest emotions, most deeply troubled thoughts, greatest frustrations, and worst anger. In fact, it's good to express exactly how we're feeling. God can handle it.

Asaph, one of the poets of ancient Israel, felt this way and wrote it out in a poem, a lament. He talks about his crisis of faith as he looked at the evil and injustice in his world:

*I almost lost my footing.  
My feet were slipping, and I was almost gone.  
For I envied the proud when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness.  
They seem to live such painless lives;  
their bodies are so healthy and strong.*

*They don't have troubles like other people;  
they're not plagued with problems like everyone else.  
They wear pride like a jeweled necklace and clothe themselves with cruelty.  
These fat cats have everything their hearts could ever wish for.*

*They scoff and speak only evil;*

*in their pride they seek to crush others.  
They boast against the very heavens, and their words strut throughout the earth.  
And so the people are dismayed and confused, drinking in all their words.  
"What does God know?" they ask. "Does the Most High even know what's happening?"*

*Look at these wicked people – enjoying a life of ease while their riches multiply.  
Did I keep my heart pure for nothing?  
Did I keep myself innocent for no reason?  
I get nothing but trouble all day long;  
every morning brings me pain.  
I tried to understand why the wicked prosper.  
But what a difficult task it is. (Psalm 73:2-15)*

Asaph goes on,

*Then I realized that my heart was bitter, and I was all torn up inside.  
I was so foolish and ignorant –  
I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you.  
Yet I still belong to you; you hold my right hand.  
You guide me with your counsel, leading me to a glorious destiny.*

*Whom have I in heaven but you?  
I desire you more than anything on earth.  
My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak,  
but God remains the strength of my heart; He is mine forever.*

*Those who desert him will perish, for you destroy those who abandon you.  
But as for me, how good it is to be near God.  
I have made the Sovereign Lord my shelter,  
and I will tell everyone about the wonderful things you do. (Psalm 73:21-28)*

Job isn't there yet. But it is encouraging to know we can bare our souls to God.

Prayer is honest communication. What do you need to speak with God about? Would it help to write it down? Would it help to talk with a trusted friend? Be honest with yourself and with God ...

*Come quickly to help me, O Lord God of my salvation,  
for the battle is great and the adversaries are powerful.  
The enemy is hostile, the invisible foe fighting through visible forms.  
Come quickly, therefore, to help me,  
and assist me through your holy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,  
through whom you have redeemed us all,  
through whom be glory and power to you forever and ever.  
In your strength and your power, I can endure all things.  
In your strength and your power, I can do all things.  
Amen.*

Origen of Alexandria (185-254)

## **Saturday, May 13: Job 8**

We won't read all the book of Job. Much of it is an extended debate between Job and his (rather depressing) friends. As Bildad, one of Job's companions, expresses here, whether we acknowledge it or not we often think that, *"if you pray to God and seek the favor of the Almighty, and if you are pure and live with integrity, he will surely rise up and restore your happy home"* (Job 8:5-6). The "be-a-good-person-and-of-course-you'll-be-blessed" theory of reality just **feels** right and logical to us. This is how **we** believe God

**should** do things. Unfortunately, these are Bildad's human words, not God's divine words.

The "wonderful" kind of world that Bildad, and many of us, envision is one in which God's creation, including human beings, actually have very little freedom. It's really a mechanistic cause-and-effect universe in which one good act deserves a blessing and one bad thing deserves a curse. It's simple. It's predictable. It's mechanical. It's robotic. Real life doesn't work like that. Reality is much more complicated.

Things are complex because our lives are so intertwined with one another. Whatever I do or say impacts other people. So, if I make a dreadful choice to run a red light, it will have consequences for me, but also for the person whom I hit. Yes, I receive a "curse" for my bad choice (actually, I just receive the logical consequence of my bad choice). But an innocent person – potentially a very, very, very good person – is injured, too. Are their injuries God's fault? Were they a result of their mistakes? Absolutely not. But they are suffering. It's NOT fair from their point of view. Things get very messy, very quickly.

The world is also incredibly complex. In a thought-provoking book on evil, Cambridge geologist (volcano expert) and Christian, Bob White, notes that, *"the deaths caused by 'natural' disasters can often be attributed almost entirely to actions taken by people, which turned a natural process into a disaster. In that respect there is nothing natural about them."* He goes on to consider earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, famines, and other disasters, noting that in wealthy developed nations very few people actually die from any of these events. However, in poor, less-developed parts of the world, huge numbers of lives are often lost. Most of those deaths would be preventable, if there was the political will to share expertise, technology – and finances – to provide the safeguards that we, in countries like Canada, enjoy.

In fact, many of those events we call natural "disasters" are natural processes that CAN be a real blessing. Without them the earth would be a barren, infertile place, potentially uninhabitable. For instance, naturally occurring floods have kept regions of the world, like the Nile River valley, fertile and fruitful. Until humans built dams. Now Egypt is much more susceptible to drought and famine. Because of human choices.

We don't understand all the complexities of natural systems. We don't understand all the variables that come from living in relationship with 7 billion other people on earth. We can trust that God, ultimately, does know how everything works (He created it) and how we can all coexist. But it may be messy. To our eyes, it may seem chaotic. But God walks with us in all times and in all ways ...

*O eternal God, King of all creation, who has brought me to this hour,  
forgive the sins which I've committed this day in thought, word, and deed.  
Cleanse, O Lord, my humble soul from every stain of flesh and spirit.  
Grant me, O Lord, to pass through the sleep of this night in peace.  
Help me rise from my lowly bed,  
to please your holy name all the days of my life.  
Help me defeat the enemies that contend against me both bodily and spiritually.  
Deliver me, O Lord, from the vain thoughts that stain me, and from evil desires.  
For yours is the kingdom and the power, and the glory,  
of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
now and forever, and unto the ages of ages.  
Amen.*

Macarius of Egypt, 300-390

### **Sunday, May 14: Job 38:1-38**

In much of the Book of Job, Job argues he's a good person. He doesn't deserve any of this. He questions God's competence and goodness. In Job 32-37, a young friend, Elihu, blasts Job and his three buddies for blatantly disrespect of God. Elihu knows he is much smarter than these old men. He repeats the same old good=blessing / evil=cursing rhetoric AND tells Job God has far more important things to care about than Job anyway. Job needs to get over himself. Elihu is very bleak, very depressing, and NOT at all helpful.

A couple of interesting –**wrong**– themes run through Job’s, Elihu’s, Bildad’s, Eliphaz’s, and Zophar’s talks:

1. **They believe a simple retribution principle is built into the cosmos:** every good action will be rewarded; every bad action is (instantly) punished. If you are suffering, you must have sinned. Bad things never happen to **good** people. Is that true? No ...
2. **They believe everything is all about us.** There is a lot of natural imagery in the speeches – storms, earthquakes, floods, animals, etc. These guys think whatever happens is all about **them**. A storm is not just a storm to provide water for plants to grow, it’s a curse on **them**. Sometimes God may use events to teach us things, but sometimes God’s earth just needs to be watered for its own sake. Rainstorms happen. It’s not all about **me**. Not everything means something.
3. **They think we can put God on trial.** Job wants to haul God into court: in Job’s mind, God stands accused of unfairness, incompetence, or worse. He ought to defend Himself. Job’s friends try to be defense lawyers, standing up for God. Really? Is that how it works?

When these men (and Job’s wife) have all had their say, they have thoroughly blasted Job. Job has brazenly blasted God. They have all said a lot, but they have no answers about why bad things happen to good people and how a loving God can allow suffering. What next? What’s next for our relationship with God when we have called Him out as a charlatan? What’s next when we’re at our wits’ end?

*"Then the Lord answered Job from the **whirlwind**: 'Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? Brace yourself like a man, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them.'"* (38:1-3). God challenges Job to put on his big boy pants. How would you feel if you were Job???

1. **God does not even come close to directly answering Job’s question** (Why do good people suffer?). Instead, God changes the subject. It’s not all about **Job** (or **me** or **you**) and his (or my or your) problems. Job and his friends haven’t found any answers because they’ve been asking the wrong questions. As a wise Father, God puts His arm around Job’s shoulder and takes Job on a guided tour of His amazing creation. There is more to the cosmos than **me**.
2. **God’s creation is not all about people.** God orders incredible natural systems for their own sake (the water cycle, the rock cycle, ecosystems, etc.). Stars move (actually the earth moves), clouds bring rain, rivers run ... just because. It’s not all about me/us/people.
3. **Within God’s creation there are some potentially dangerous realities** – rain, floods, ice, lightning, drought. These are essential parts of creation (the rain allows life to grow).
4. **God chooses not to micromanage every cloud or every frost.** God creates order from chaos. He establishes orderly systems. And He guides His creation’s overall framework rather than micro-managing every aspect. There is an openness, freedom, and unpredictability (within limits) in God’s creation. This can result in some “challenging” things. And, human choices have consequences.

Do we fully understand these natural systems, today? Not even close. We know a lot more about how God’s creation works in 2023 than Job and his buddies did back then. Modern science has been an amazing blessing: we have learned about God’s creation, developed technologies, made amazing discoveries, created medicines, etc. Johannes Kepler described his scientific research as *"thinking God’s thoughts after Him."* Many scientists, past and present, see their scientific work is a profoundly spiritual act.

At the end of day, like Job, however, we stand back in awe and wonder. We now understand more and more of the vastness of the cosmos than Job did. We ought to be even more overwhelmed. God’s point is not to make Job feel insignificant and irrelevant (Elihu tried that). God’s point is to help Job appreciate that, if the God who created all this glory is with him, he has nothing to fear.

God’s wants Job to appreciate he is always in His hands. He is safe walking with the God who orders the cosmos (but doesn’t necessarily micromanage it). God’s desire for Job (and us) is that we can say with Paul, *"I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength"* (Philippians 4:11-13).



That is not easy. Pray that God would help you know His presence, comfort, and strength today.

*My eternal Savior, you alone are Almighty.  
You are the Lord, the God of all beings, and the God of my fathers.  
You, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,  
are merciful, compassionate, long-suffering, and rich in mercy.  
To you every heart is opened, and every secret thought is revealed.  
My soul cries out to you; my hope rests confidently in you.  
You have created the world to be a battlefield, where my faith will be tried.  
Yet you have also opened to me, and to all, the gate of mercy.  
  
You made clear that the possession of riches is not everlasting.  
Beauty will not last.  
Strength and power are easily gone.  
Only the fruit of true faith will last.  
The only thing that will last and take us to heaven,  
is the possession of a life of true faith.  
Lord, strengthen my faith and empower my service.  
  
Lord, hear my prayers as I battle on.  
You know, too, the prayers I have not spoken,  
for your Spirit reaches even into my heart,  
and your all-seeing gaze searches my thoughts, Lord.  
Lord, have mercy on me.  
Amen.*

Apostolic Constitutions (4<sup>th</sup> Century)

### **Monday, May 15: Job 38:39-39:30**

There is a lot of “challenging” in Job. The book begins with “*the satan/the challenger/the accuser*” taking on Job. It continues with Job’s friends (and Elihu) challenging Job’s integrity. Job challenges his companions’ simplistic cause-and-effect theology. Job even dares to challenge God’s power, goodness, and competence.

Now **God** is challenging **Job**. He does so with a torrent of unanswerable questions. God begins with the farthest reaches of space and time, continues through the natural systems of weather, botany, and zoology. God moves from the cosmically huge to the daily mundane things Job takes for granted. Maybe Job can appreciate the order, design, and “contained freedom” within God’s amazing creation.

1. ***All of this just happens.*** Lions hunt, goats give birth, wild donkeys, oxen, and ostriches run free ... just because. It’s not about people. It’s not about you (or me). God has created beauty, wonder, and intricate natural systems because He enjoys it. All His creation worships Him.
2. ***We don’t understand how all this works.*** It is great to learn more and more about God’s universe, but we will never fully comprehend it. There is a humility to good science (as there is an even more profound humility to good theology). We can’t fully understand God or His creation.
3. ***Not all of God’s creation is “tame” or “gentle.”*** There are lightning bolts and lions. There are unpredictable wild oxen and battle-hardened war horses. There is inherent danger within the glorious fabric of creation. It is not as nice, gentle, or safe as we might like.
4. ***There is a “contained freedom” within God’s orderly world.*** God has brought order out of chaos. He is not a cosmic clockmaker who made an intricate machine that operates mechanistically. He is a great Artist, who has created an amazing living, dynamic masterpiece, where individuals have freedom to make wise (and not so wise) choices – all of which have consequences.

Does this revelation answer Job’s question at all? God does tackle Job’s accusation that creation is out of control. He challenges how people define “control.” “*The deterministic and predictable response of a cosmos that metes out retribution on the unjust is not a living universe but a dead one,*” argues scientist Tom

McLeish. *"The axis of control and chaos is subverted by the revelation of a third path of constrained freedom in which true exploration of possibility, of life, really lies."* All of God's creation has a freedom and unpredictability within it that can lead to good or ill. Without that freedom we are simply robots.

God also helps Job see beyond himself and his own problems to see a bigger perspective on life, the universe, and everything. When we are in pain, our own suffering can be all consuming. Our world turns inwards. We become self-absorbed. If we can look up, look out, and see that there is life and hope beyond ourselves, we can make it through. This is what Job needs to do – to see that there is a God who does love Him, who is walking with Him, and ultimately does provide order in our chaos ... but maybe not as we want.

Paul, writing from the chaos, pain, and uncertainty of a Roman prison, encourages us, *"Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again – rejoice. Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon. Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 4:4-7).

*Jesus, You are the ever-living one.  
Jesus, You are without beginning, like the Father, and co-eternal with the Spirit.  
Jesus, You are He who made all things out of nothing.  
Jesus, You are the Prince of the angels.  
Jesus, You are He at whom the depths tremble.  
Jesus, You are He who is covered with light as with the garment.  
Jesus, You are He who made us, and fashioned us at birth.  
Jesus, You are He who formed things invisible.  
Lord Jesus, help me see You and know You as my King, my Saviour, my God.  
Lord Jesus, help me serve You as my King, my Saviour, my God.  
Amen.*

Hippolytus of Rome (165-235)

## **Tuesday, May 16: Job 40-41**

In the film, *Bruce Almighty*, Jim Carrey stars as a down-on-his-luck TV reporter who complains to God (Morgan Freeman) that He is not doing His job correctly. Carrey's character (ironically, for me, named "Bruce") is offered the chance to try being God himself for one week. It doesn't go well (you would have to watch the movie to learn more). The premise comes from the Book of Job. God challenges Job – *"So, you think you can do it better, do you? Prove it."* Would you be up to the challenge?

*"Then the Lord said to Job, 'Do you still want to argue with the Almighty? You are God's critic, but do you have the answers?'"*

*"Then Job replied to the Lord, 'I am nothing – how could I ever find the answers? I will cover my mouth with my hand. I have said too much already. I have nothing more to say.'" (40:1-5).*

Job is learning some wisdom ... by learning some humility. If we are honest with ourselves, we don't understand God's creation or God much at all, either.

God goes on to talk about two strange creatures, behemoth and leviathan. God is using these two bizarre creatures to help Job understand his life in relation to God.

As God introduces behemoth, He says, *"Take a look at Behemoth, which I made, just as I made **you**"* (40:15). Behemoth, like Job (and us), is God's one of God's creatures. Consider the parallels to Job/us:

- It is content and well fed (just as Job has been, 40:15).
- It is made strong (just as Job has been, 40:16-18).
- It is "first" among God's creations (just as people are created in God's image, 40:19).

- It is well cared for (as Job has been, 40:20).
- It has been sheltered and protected (as Job has been, 40:21-22).
- It is not alarmed by natural events (as Job should not be, 40:23).
- It trusts and is secure (as Job should be, 40:23).
- It cannot be captured or trapped (as Job should not be, 40:24).

When God speaks of leviathan, the tone changes. While behemoth was made as I made ***YOU*** (40:15), leviathan is something “other” than Job/us. Leviathan is not like us. Old Testament scholar, John Walton suggests leviathan represents God (the passage never talks about God’s relationship to leviathan. Leviathan stands on his own.

- Leviathan cannot be controlled (neither can God, 41:1-2).
- He will not submit or beg for mercy (neither will God, 41:3-6).
- He cannot be wounded, overpowered, or defeated (neither can God, 41:7-9)
- Note 41:10 (God self-identifies as leviathan): *"And since no one dares to disturb it, who then can stand up to me?"*
- Note 41:11 (God self-identifies again): *"Who has given me anything that I need to pay back?"*
- He cannot be “tamed” or controlled by humans (neither can God, 41:12-18).
- He is dangerous when angered (as is God, 41:19-25).
- He is invulnerable and invincible (as is God, 41:26-32).
- He has no equal, including Job (41:33).
- He is the King (as, ultimately, is God, 41:34).

John Walton concludes, *"Yahweh's (God's) message is clear: 'Job, be strong and content like behemoth, and don't think that you can domesticate or subdue me anymore than you can Leviathan.' ... since Job cannot bring Leviathan to heel, he cannot expect to domesticate Yahweh (God)."*

It's interesting to reflect on the qualities God ascribes to the content and faith-full behemoth – and us. How does God provide for us? Care for us? Protect us? What can I be thankful for? How can I trust God more?

And it's worthwhile reflecting on who God is. We often try to tame Him. We think we have Him all figured out. We like to put Him in a box (Job's friends were doing this: *"God has to work in just this way ..."*). God is far more leviathan-like: amazing, awe-inspiring, mysterious, and beyond our understanding. Does that bother you? Why? Maybe it should move us to worship and awe ...

How can we pray differently, thanks to Job 38-41?

*May I be no man's enemy,  
and may I be the friend of that which is eternal and lasts forever.  
May I never quarrel with those nearest me: and if I do, may I be reconciled quickly.  
May I love, seek, and attain only that which is good.  
May I wish for all people's happiness and envy none.  
May I never rejoice in the ill-fortune of one who has wronged me.  
May I win no victory that harms either me or my opponent.  
May I reconcile friends who are angry with one another.  
May I, to the extent of my power, give help to all who are in need.  
May I never fail a friend who is in danger.  
When visiting those in grief or suffering, may I be able to soften their pain,  
by gentle and healing words.  
May I always keep tame that which rages within me.  
May I never discuss who is wicked and what wicked things he has done,  
but may I know good people and follow in their footsteps.  
Amen.*

Eusebius (3<sup>rd</sup> century)

## Wednesday, May 17: Job 42

In response to God's revelation, if I were Job I would say, *"Great. I understand a bit more. I am so glad I spoke up, because you do need to make things clearer for us, God. I still think you could have provided a more pertinent answer. God, you may now step down from the dock. My court case against you is over. You are acquitted."* (Like I have the power to acquit God Almighty? The audacity! The unmitigated gall!)

How does Job actually respond? *"I know that you can do anything, and no one can stop you. You asked, 'Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorance?' It is I – and I was talking about things I knew nothing about, things far too wonderful for me. You said, 'Listen and I will speak. I have some questions for you, and you must answer them.' I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance"* (42:1-6).

This is humility. This is repentance. This is a recognition that Job is the creature, God is the Creator.

Some people don't like Job 42:7-17. It seems like a return to the ultra-simplistic "do-good-be-blessed/do-bad-be-cursed" retribution principle that has been roundly condemned through the whole book. But there is a lot more going on here:

1. ***God honours the gritty honesty of Job ... and rejects the pious platitudes and shallow attempts to defend His honour put forward by Elihu, Eliphaz and friends.*** God, for all His rough handling of Job's rude demands, reads between the lines and sees Job's honest desire to know God. When we're struggling, we can be just as honest, just as bold, just as forthright. God honours our honest searching. God honours our honest, raw, pain-full prayers.
2. ***God asks Job to pray for his friends.*** Clearly Job's misfortunes are not punishment for sin. He is called by God to be an intercessor for his friends. There is such a thing as undeserved affliction. Suffering can just happen. We can choose we respond. We need to pray for those who don't yet know God in all His wonder – and mystery.
3. ***By honouring Job as His servant, God unconditionally accepts Job,*** despite his flustering and blustering. Nothing and no-one can separate us from God's love.
4. ***Job challenges us to live with the mystery of not fully understanding.*** Somehow, through pain and suffering, God can do amazing things in our lives. Through tough times, we can grow in our faith. That is not to say God causes suffering for our spiritual growth. It is to say that through our suffering, God can work in surprising ways to help us know Him more deeply.

The Bible's final commentary on Job comes in James' letter: *"Dear brothers and sisters, be patient as you wait for the Lord's return. Consider the farmers who patiently wait for the rains in the fall and in the spring. They eagerly look for the valuable harvest to ripen. You, too, must be patient. Take courage, for the coming of the Lord is near. Don't grumble about each other, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. For look – the Judge is standing at the door.*

*"For examples of patience in suffering, dear brothers and sisters, look at the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. We give great honor to those who endure under suffering. For instance, you know about **Job**, a man of great endurance. You can see how the Lord was kind to him at the end, for the Lord is full of tenderness and mercy"* (James 5:7-11).

*"That,"* comments Old Testament scholar, Derek Kidner, *"is the last word on the matter, both in the book of Job and in the New Testament's reflection on it. And that will be the last word in the bigger drama: not that man will demand and get his answers or his imagined rights, but that God will give, to those who endure to the end in this bitter war, 'such good things as pass man's understanding.'"*

*Lord you have called us to hope in your name.  
Save those of us who are in affliction,  
have mercy on the lonely,  
raise up those who are fallen,  
be present to those who are in need,  
heal the sick,  
bring back those of your people who have gone astray.  
Feed the hungry,  
redeem the captives,  
lift up those who are weak,  
comfort the faint hearted.*

*I know that I may be the vessel you use to accomplish these miracles.  
My hands are your hands, my arms are your arms, and my feet are your feet.  
Guide in all your ways of compassion and grace.  
You all are the highest among the highest,  
and the holiest among the holy.  
All glory to your name.  
Amen*

Clement of Rome (1<sup>st</sup> century)

### Thursday, May 18: Judges 13

Job was a story that took place during the times of the Judges, the early decades after the Israelites returned from Egypt. After all God had done to save the Israelites from Egypt and to give them the Promised Land (the fall of the walls of Jericho and all that), notice where the Israelites are at spiritually: *"Again the Israelites did evil in the Lord's sight"* ("again" – this was not the first time!). They are a stiff-necked people. "Israel" is aptly named, "a people who struggle with God." *"So the Lord handed them over to the Philistines, who oppressed them for forty years."* Sigh.

Among the Judges who ruled Israel was Samson. On the one hand, Samson was blessed by God. On the other hand, Samson was an ungrateful, self-absorbed playboy. He took advantage of his blessings for his own prestige and pleasure, not for the purpose of delivering his people from their enemies.

At this point, however, note who initiates this "prayer"/conversation with God (through His angel). It's not Manoah. It's not Manoah's wife (who is curiously, never even named). **God** chooses to communicate with His people, most specifically with **this woman whom the author of Judges doesn't even consider important enough to name**. Rather like the angel who appears to Mary at Jesus' conception, God is choosing to speak with ordinary people, even sub-ordinary people (poor women of no importance).

I find it tremendously encouraging that often **God** initiates speaking to us. If we are at all attentive, God may, in fact, be speaking to us in the quietness of our own hearts, in the stillness of our own minds, through Scripture, or a godly friend. Our part in the conversation is simply to listen. And then, in faith, to obey.

Take some time for quiet reflection today. What might God be saying to you today?

*May God the Father bless us.  
May Christ take care of us.  
May the Holy Spirit enlighten us all the days of our life.  
May your Kingdom come  
and your will be done on Earth as it is in heaven.  
The Lord be our defender and keeper of body and soul,  
both now and for ever, to the ages of ages.  
Amen*

Æthelwold (908-984)

## Friday, May 19: Judges 16

Samson is a despicable wretch (read [Judges 14-15](#) to learn more). He routinely breaks the Nazirite vows his mother made on his behalf. (The specific requirements the angel communicates to Manoah's wife relate to the ancient Jewish subgroup of "Nazirites," from the Hebrew word meaning "consecrated" or "separated" – nothing to do with "Nazarenes," people from Nazareth. A "Nazirite" took a vow described in [Numbers 6:1-21](#). This vow required the person to (1) abstain from wine, grapes, raisins, intoxicating liquors, wine vinegar, and any substance containing any trace of grapes, (2) refrain from cutting the hair on one's head, and (3) not to become ritually impure by contact with corpses. Samson violated all of these principles. These are NOT normative for ALL people in ALL times and ALL places – people like us).

Samson gives neither God nor his country a second thought in his headlong hedonism. He takes the incredible blessings God has given them and squanders them in sordid self-indulgence. He is obsessed with his own self-gratification. Look where it gets him.

Does Samson even believe in God? To this point we have no convincing evidence he does. He has godly parents. But he thinks he is managing his own life pretty well, thank you. Until now.

Desperate, broken, and humiliated, Samson cries out to God. Interestingly, he does not blame God. He doesn't ask for deliverance. Samson is wise enough to recognize that God has not put him in this place. Samson is where he is thanks to his own foolishness and bad choices.

Samson is still self-absorbed: "*Sovereign Lord, remember me again. O God, please strengthen me just one more time. With one blow let me pay back the Philistines for the loss of my two eyes*" (15:28). It's not about saving his country from their mortal enemies. It's about his own bloodlust for personal revenge.

God does answer his prayer, probably not in response to his desire for revenge, but rather as a round-about way of saving the Israelites by killing the Philistine powers-that-be. In a cryptic footnote the author notes that Samson "*killed more people when he died than he had during his entire lifetime.*" This is not praise for anything noble about Samson, rather a bittersweet observation about Samson's unfulfilled potential.

The good news in this passage is that even when people as "lost" as Samson call out to God, He hears their prayers. If God hears Samson, no one is too far gone for God. That doesn't mean God always answers their/our prayers the way they/we want. In Samson's case, God is not really avenging Samson's wounded pride. He is saving His people.

Do you know someone who seems so far away from God? God never gave up on Samson. God never gives up on anyone else either. Don't give up on them. Pray for them.

Encourage those people who don't know God to pray. You never know what God may do ...

*Lord Jesus Christ, King of Kings:  
you have power over life and death.  
You know even that which is not clear, but hard to understand.  
Even what I think and feel is not hidden from you.  
Therefore, cleanse me from my hidden sins,  
for you have seen the wrong I have done.  
As each day passes, the end of my life comes nearer,  
and my sins increase in number.  
You, Lord, my Creator, know how feeble I am.  
In my weakness, strengthen me. When I suffer, uphold me,  
and I will glorify you, my Lord and my God.  
Amen.*

Ephraem of Syria (306-373)



## Saturday, May 20: 1 Samuel 1:1-20

François Fenelon writes, *"Tell God all that is in your heart, as one unloads one's heart, its pleasures and its pains, to a dear friend. Tell God your troubles, that God may comfort you; tell God your joys, that God may sober them; tell God your longings, that God may purify them; tell God your dislikes, that God may help you conquer them; talk to God of your temptations, that God may shield you from them: show God the wounds of your heart, that God may heal them."*

*"If you thus pour out all your weaknesses, needs, troubles, there will be no lack of what to say. Talk out of the abundance of the heart, without consideration say just what you think. Blessed are they who attain to such familiar, unreserved conversation with God."*

In ancient Israel, for a wife to be childless was awful. In particular, to have no sons (1:6) meant you failed to live up to everyone's expectations (especially your husband's). Despite cultural pressures to put Hannah aside, Elkanah loves her (1:5, 8). Meanwhile, Peninnah is so human: we sometimes delight in another's misery. Hannah grieves and becomes depressed. Her health suffers.

Have you ever experienced emotions similar to Hannah's? When? Why? What do you think of Elkanah's attempts at comfort? What does he do right? Wrong? What has been helpful to you in difficult times? What has not been too helpful? (How can we best help others?)

Like Hannah, many people in Scripture suffer pain, sorrow, and frustration with God (Abraham and Sarah, Rachel, Job, Jonah, the exiles in Babylon, the prophets, etc.). Many of the psalms express these raw emotions ("laments," e.g. [Psalm 88](#)).

How does Hannah handle her issues? She talks with God. She prays. Despite her depression, Hannah's prayer shows the depth of her intimate relationship with God (1:12-13). In a culture where prayer was normally spoken aloud in formal phrases, her deep, silent prayers "in the Spirit" are very moving. Eli misinterprets her devotion (drunkenness was not uncommon thanks to pagan religious festivals). Once Eli understands the depth of Hannah's love for God, he blesses her.

Hannah's emotions are dramatically different in 1:8 and 1:18. What has changed in her circumstances? Nothing (yet). But she continues worshiping God and praying to Him, despite her pain and disappointment.

Though our circumstances may make it difficult to see how God is working in our lives, He invites us to trust Him all the same. Sometimes trust expresses itself in desperate prayers, rather than songs of joy.

John Wesley once said, *"I have so much to do that I spend several hours in prayer before I am able to do it."* Hannah's attitude – and perspective on life – is similarly transformed by prayer. It is amazing, in the psalms, how as God's people pray, they often move from despair to hope (e.g. [Psalm 22](#), [86](#), etc.).

Do you find it difficult to worship or pray during hard times? What can you learn from Hannah's perseverance? How can you "persevere," praying in spite of your feelings?

*O Lord, my God, great, eternal, wonderful in glory,  
life of all, help to those who flee to you,  
hope of those who cry to you,  
cleanse me from my sins, secret and open,  
and from every thought displeasing to your goodness.  
Cleanse my body and my soul,  
my heart and my conscience.  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, create within me a pure heart and a clean soul, that,  
with perfect love and calm hope,  
I may venture confidently and fearlessly to pray to you,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

Liturgy of St. Basil (4<sup>th</sup> Century)

## Sunday, May 21: 1 Samuel 1:19-2:11

Hannah went many years without an answer to her prayer. Eventually God does answer her.

In Hannah's case, God blesses her with a son. God may answer our prayers positively (as with Hannah). Sometimes we wait, and wait, and wait – there seems to be no answer at all. Sometimes God says "No." Have you experienced each kind of answer in your life? How have you dealt with each answer?

- When God answers, "Yes," I ...
- When God make me wait, I ...
- When God says "No," I ...

Here are a few intriguing quotes to muse on today:

- *"God's answers are wiser than our prayers."* (Unknown)
- *"There are more tears shed over answered prayers than over unanswered prayers."* (Teresa of Avila)
- *"God does not delay to hear our prayers because He has no mind to give; but that, by enlarging our desires, He may give us the more largely."* (Anselm of Canterbury)
- In a more pop-culture format, Garth Brooks has a song entitled, *"Unanswered Prayers"* (*"Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers / Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs / That just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean he don't care / Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers."* Get the whole song here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GuA5PZx3K4>)

An anonymous soldier in the brutal U.S. Civil War wrote,

*I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;  
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.  
I asked for health, that I might do greater things;  
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.  
I asked for riches, that I might be happy;  
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.  
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;  
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.  
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;  
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing I had asked for – but everything I had hoped for.  
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.  
I am, among all men, most richly blessed.*

How do I respond to that?

Remember Hannah had made a vow to God that her son would be dedicated to God (1:11). As a symbol of that he would not cut his hair (another "Nazirite" like Samson and perhaps John the Baptist). She would also give him up to God. I'm sure she must have been tempted to break her vow and keep her precious son. But she doesn't break her word. She entrusts the young boy to God and leaves him with Eli, the priest (1:28, 2:11). God honours her faithfulness by blessing her with five other children (1 Samuel 2:21).

In 1 Samuel 2, we read Hannah's prayer. She celebrates that God is powerful and holy (2:1-2), God silences His critics (2:3), God reverses fortunes (2:4-8), God provides for His people (2:9), and God deals with His enemies and exalts His "anointed one" – literally (in Hebrew) the "Messiah" – (in Greek) the "Christ" – Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ (2:10).

What are you learning about your relationship with God – prayer – from Hannah?

*O Lord, show Your mercy to me and gladden my heart.  
 I am like the man on the way to Jericho who was overtaken by robbers,  
 wounded and left for dead (Luke 10:25-37).  
 O Good Samaritan, come to my aid.  
 I am like the sheep that went astray (Luke 15:1-7).  
 O Good Shepherd, seek me out and bring me home in accord with Your will.  
 I am like the proud Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14).  
 O Master, make me humble and kind.  
 Let me dwell in Your house all the days of my life and praise You  
 for ever and ever with those who are there.  
 Amen.*

Jerome (347-420)

## **Monday, May 22: 1 Samuel 3**

We like the “good news” bits of Scripture. There’s the “Prayer of Jabez”: *“Oh, that you would bless me and expand my territory. Please be with me in all that I do, and keep me from all trouble and pain.” And God granted him his request*” (1 Chronicles 4:10). God wants to expand my territory and be rich – yay! Really?

There is Jeremiah 29:11: *“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.”* God will only give us good things – yay! Really?

A warning. I yanked those verses way out of context. There is a lot more nuance to those passages. In context, they don’t actually say what we might like them to say, when taken in isolation.

Then there are awkward passages like 1 Samuel 3. The situation is this: Eli’s sons are not nice people. In 1 Samuel 2:12-36 their wickedness is described in lurid detail: *“Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels who had no respect for the Lord or for their duties as priests. Whenever anyone offered a sacrifice, Eli’s sons would send over a servant with a three-pronged fork. While the meat of the sacrificed animal was still boiling, the servant would stick the fork into the pot and demand that whatever it brought up be given to Eli’s sons ... The servant would demand, ‘Give it to me now, or I’ll take it by force.’*

*“The sin of these young men was very serious in the Lord’s sight, for they treated the Lord’s offerings with contempt ... Now Eli was very old, but he was aware of what his sons were doing to the people of Israel. He knew, for instance, that his sons were seducing the young women who assisted at the entrance of the Tabernacle ...”* The sad, sordid tale goes on and on.

God clearly tells Eli that, because of his sons’ despicable ways, they will NEVER become priests. God says, *“I will honor those who honor me, and I will despise those who think lightly of me. The time is coming when I will put an end to your family, so it will no longer serve as my priests”* (1 Samuel 2:30-31). Ouch.

In any relationship, honesty is essential. Honesty is key in good friendships, marriages, families, and business partnerships. We become better people, and our relationships become stronger, when we face our mistakes and challenges with honesty, compassion, and love. Being able to work through problems, to admit we’re wrong, and to apologize to the ones we love is really tough. It’s also really important.

What if, in our relationship with God, honesty is paramount, too? And what if, honesty means we have to admit to God that we’ve made mistakes, missed the mark, failed to be who He has created us to be ... we have sinned? Can we do that? When we are honest with God about our “issues,” He forgives us ([1 John 1:9](#)). That is good news. When we are honest with God, we also know the joy of having our relationship with Him renewed, restored, and enriched.

Spend some time in prayer with God today ... Be honest.

*Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,  
 look upon me and have mercy upon me.  
 You are both my Reward and my Redeemer.  
 I confess my sins to you.  
 Thank you for your gift of forgiveness and grace.  
 I repent.  
 I pray that, through your Holy Spirit, you would change my paths,  
 and keep me safe from evil.  
 I praise you for you have redeemed me,  
 O Saviour of the world.  
 For all this and more I give thanks.  
 Amen.*

Iranaeus of Lyons (130-200)

## Tuesday, May 23: 1 Samuel 16:1-13

If we don't ask, we don't receive right? If we do ask, God will give us what we ask for, right? There is a cultural belief about prayer that, if we don't ask, God won't do anything. And if we do ask, God must give us what we ask for. Is that true?

What does Samuel – a godly person – ask God? Samuel, Israel's spiritual leader, is asking for a new king for Israel. He believes handsome, strong, oldest son Eliab is God's choice. He should anoint Eliab as king, right? What is God's answer? *"Don't judge by his appearance or height ..."* God says to *"The Lord doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."*

Does David ask for anything from God? Yet what does God do?

God's will and God's actions are more complicated than we might like ...

David is described as *"a man after God's own heart"* (1 Samuel 13:14, Acts 13:22). But David is far from perfect. In fact, his behaviours will rival Eli's sons' despicable actions. But there is something about David that pleases God. David is open to God's Spirit. He hears God's correction, confesses his sin honestly, changes his heart, alters his course, and tries to live a godly life. That spirit isn't there with Eli's boys.

The good news for us is we don't have to be perfect. We don't have to look "perfect." We don't have to despair if, on occasion, we blow it and don't act perfectly. God looks on our hearts. And if we are genuinely open to His Spirit – if we hear His correction, confess our sin honestly, change our hearts, alter our courses, and try to live godly lives – God smiles upon us. He gives us a new beginning.

Of course, we WANT to do our best. In general, life goes better when we do act in line with God's will. But if our heart is in the right place, God can deal with our brokenness and mistakes. Thank God for His grace, mercy, and unconditional love. Thank Him, too, that He can help you start again on the right road ...

*O God of infinite mercy and boundless majesty,  
 whom no distance of space nor length of time can separate from us –  
 I trust in you.  
 Be with me through all the ways in which I am to go.  
 Be my constant guide and my companion.  
 May no adversity harm me and no difficulty oppose me.  
 By the help of your right hand, may I receive whatever I have truly needed.  
 Whoever I need to be, may I be shaped by your guiding hand,  
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
 Amen.*

Gelasian Sacramentary (5<sup>th</sup> Century)

## Wednesday, May 24: Psalm 56

After the highlights of David's anointing by Samuel and his miraculous defeat of Goliath (remember the story of the slingshot?), the present king of Israel, Saul gets a bit upset (understandably). Saul is worried about a revolution. So David is on the run. He takes Goliath's sword and flees to the enemy city of Gath. Saul won't follow him into Philistine territory. But Gath is Goliath's hometown. The Gath-ites are not thrilled to see Goliath's killer with Goliath's sword. David's life is in real danger. (Read the story in [1 Samuel 21](#))

Psalm 56 is "*A psalm of David, regarding the time the Philistines seized him in Gath.*"

Sometimes life goes well. Sometimes life stinks. Sometimes our lives stink because of things beyond our control. David didn't choose to be anointed king; he didn't really choose to be a hero; he didn't intentionally challenge Saul's authority. Other times, life stinks because we make bad choices: David, with Goliath's sword at his side, chooses to flee to Gath, Goliath's own hometown. Not a smart life choice.

In Psalm 56, David does pray for God's mercy (verse 1). But most of the psalm is NOT a long list of things David wants God to do for him. It is NOT an extended plea for deliverance. It is not the prayer I would have prayed. I would have simply prayed, "*God, save me, please, please, please, pretty please save me ...*"

What does David say in his prayer?

- He does describe his enemies in vivid detail.
- Mostly He reminds himself of who God is, what God has done for him in the past, and how God can provide for him in the present and future.

Even in our most difficult times, it's good to praise God. To remember His grace. To bring back to mind His mercies. To recall His goodness. Knowing the character of God in the past gives us strength for the present and future (after all, God is the same yesterday, today, and forever).

Read through Psalm 56 a couple of times. Don't get distracted by the specifics of David's situation (his enemies). Focus on what David is teaching us about the character of God – yesterday, today, and forever.

Praise God for what He has promised. God keeps track of all your sorrows. He has collected all your tears in a bottle; He has recorded each one in His book. God is with you. God is on your side.

Trust in Him. Since you trust in God, why should you be afraid? What can mere mortals do to you? He has rescued you from death; He has kept your feet from slipping. So now you can walk in His presence, in His life-giving light. Praise God.

*Lord you have called us to hope in your name.  
Save those of us who are in affliction.  
Have mercy on the lonely.  
Raise up those who are fallen.  
Be present to those who are in need.  
Heal the sick.  
Bring back those of your people who have gone astray.  
Feed the hungry.  
Redeem the captives.  
Lift up those who are weak.  
Comfort the faint hearted.  
You are the highest among the highest, and the holiest among the holy.  
We hope in your name.  
Amen*

Clement of Rome (1<sup>st</sup> century)

## Thursday, May 25: Psalm 57

After David's cool reception in Gath, he flees into the wilderness. He ends up living in a cave ([1 Samuel 22-24](#)). Psalm 57 is "A psalm of David, regarding the time he fled from Saul and went into the cave."

David is brutally honest with God about his plight and his needs. When life is good, thank God. When life is not going well, we can be completely frank with God, too. We don't need to sugar coat our situation with Him, or pretend things are great when they're not. He knows about it anyway.

During David's plea, he remembers God's grace and mercy. Despite running for his life and living rough, David celebrates God's faithful character in the past as an encouragement for the present and the future: *"I will thank you, Lord, among all the people. I will sing your praises among the nations. For your unfailing love is as high as the heavens. Your faithfulness reaches to the clouds. Be exalted, O God, above the highest heavens. May your glory shine over all the earth."*

This verse is in the song: *"I will give thanks to Thee, O Lord among the people. I will sing praises to Thee among the nations. For Thy steadfast love is great; It is great to the heavens. And Thy faithfulness, Thy faithfulness, to the clouds. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let Thy glory be over all the earth. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let Thy glory be over all the earth."* Now you know the context: this praise comes out of David's suffering (watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QRXCyHh9hg>)

In our joys and sorrows, rejoicing and mourning, celebrating and crying, it's good to spend time simply worshipping God. Billy Graham, at age 92, was asked by an interviewer what he might do differently if he could live his life over again. Graham replied, *I would study more, pray more, travel less, take less speaking engagements.* Knowing Billy Graham as a great evangelist, we might assume he meant he would pray for more people to come to faith in Jesus through his ministry. But what he actually said: *"If I had it to do over again, I'd spend more time in meditation and prayer and telling the Lord how much I love him and adore him and am looking forward to the time we are going to spend together for eternity."*

- Be honest with God about your struggles, needs, and issues.
- Remember and celebrate God's unfailing love and faithfulness, too.
- Spend a bit of time in meditation and prayer and telling the Lord how much you love him and adore him and are looking forward to the time you are going to spend together for eternity.

*Your Glorious Name, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit  
is worthy of praise from every mouth,  
of confession from every tongue,  
of worship from every creature.  
You have created the whole world in your grace,  
and by your compassion you have saved the world.  
To your Majesty, O God,  
ten thousand times ten thousand bow down and adore,  
singing and praising without ceasing and saying,  
'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts; heaven and earth are full of your praises.  
Hosanna in the highest.'*

*May my heart and my voice worship you in Spirit and in truth today, too, O my God.  
Jesus, thank you that you do have all authority in heaven and on earth:  
Help me to be your servant and ambassador, sharing this way of life,  
instructing those I meet in the practice of all you have commanded us.  
Thank you that You are with me as I do this,  
day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.  
Amen*

Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389) and Matthew 28:19-20



## Friday, May 26: 1 Samuel 23:1-6

God created the universe and everything in it. God established the natural laws and principles that make it all work well. God set the finely tuned physical properties that allow life to thrive on Earth. The physical world and universe around us are evidence of God's majesty, wisdom, and presence. Since God created all this, and it is "good" (the refrain repeated through Genesis 1), things should just go along well ...

So what about miracles? Some people interpret miracles as the "real" evidence for God. However, this suggests that normal life happens without God. God is only in the miracles. In this case, God has to dramatically, super-naturally, intervene now and then to prove He exists.

An atheist friend of mine asks the awkward question: Is God in the normal stuff of life? Or is God in the abnormal – miracles – of life? Which is it? You can't have it both ways ...

We CAN have it both ways. God IS in the normal, predictable cycles of day and night, summer and winter, growing and aging, birth and death. AND, once in a blue moon, God does dramatically change things up and do a miracle. Why does He miraculously intervene sometimes and not others? Why does He heal one person and not others on a cancer ward? Why does He help David and his friends (who are still on the run from King Saul) win a dramatic victory this time and not every time? We don't know. Scripture doesn't give us a clear formula about when and why these unusual things happen. What is clear is that God does what God does according to His will, not according to our demands, desires, or formulas.

Should we pray for healing or other special things? Absolutely. But (contrary to some media personalities) we cannot command miracles, conjure miracles, or manipulate God into performing miracles. God will do what God will do. We need the grace to accept either His miracles ... or not.

So, if God's action is not directed by or dependent upon our prayers, why pray? That's a great question. Prayer does many things for **us**: we spend time talking with God, sharing our issues with God, praising God, reflecting on God's character, wrestling with God, and baring our souls to God. Our attitudes, understandings, and perspectives are often transformed through prayer. And sometimes, yes, our prayers really do seem to matter to God ([Genesis 18:16-33](#)).

In the meantime, thank God for the "normal" things of life – blessings from God we often just take for granted. Thank God for your relationship with Him, for His mercy, grace, and love. Thank God for your friends, family, home, food, resources, income, health, abilities, country, security ... Celebrate those taken-for-granted blessings from God that are very real, tangible expressions of God's provision.

*Almighty God, before whom all hearts are open,  
all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden ...  
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
That we may love you, perfectly,  
and love our neighbour perfectly.  
All glory to your Name, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.  
Amen*

Gregorian Sacramentary (6<sup>th</sup> Century)

## Saturday, May 27: 2 Samuel 1:17-27

There are times when you just need to be sad. You need to grieve. For a season, that's OK.

Saul and his son (David's friend), Jonathan, are dead. David goes through the stages of grief and mourning:

1. Denial and isolation – "This isn't happening ..."
2. Anger – David lashes out at the messenger (earlier in 2 Samuel 1)
3. Bargaining – "If only I had done ..."
4. Depression – a deep sense of sadness and regret
5. Acceptance – we make our "peace" with our loss and go on. It will be different, but we go on ...

When we think of prayer, we tend to focus on bringing our requests to God, on praising God, on thanking God ... But there is also a "lament" kind of prayer when we pour out our sorrow, grief, and pain before God. A surprising number of the psalms are actually this type of prayer (FYI, psalms of individual lament include Psalms 3, 4, 5, 7, 9-10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 36, 39, 40:12-17, 41, 42-43, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 70, 71, 77, 86, 89, 120, 139, 141, 142. Psalms of communal (or national) lament include Psalms 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129).

Things may be going really well in your life. Great. Praise God for that.

But if life really hurts, if you're mourning the loss of a loved one, if life just seems to be dragging you down, if you have chronic pain, if you need work, or if you're looking for the light at the end of the tunnel and it really does seem like an oncoming train ... be honest with God. He can handle it.

If you know someone who is going through a tough time, reach out to them. Go for coffee. Phone. Give them a hug. Send a card. Don't "say" anything much. They don't need advice. They just need a friend. They just need you.

*I give you thanks, yes, more than thanks, O Lord our God,  
the Father of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ,  
for all your goodness at all times and in all places.  
You, O Lord, have shielded, rescued, helped,  
and guided me all the days of my life,  
and brought me to this hour.*

*Please do not leave me, O Lord;  
nor lead me not into temptation,  
but deliver me from the evil one and from his works  
through the grace, mercy, and love of your only begotten Son.  
I pray that you would bless your church, O Lord,  
with what is good and right.  
Through your beloved son, Jesus, our glorious Savior,  
be glory and power to you,  
in your most holy, good, and life-giving Spirit,  
now, from this day forth, and forever more.  
Amen.*

Liturgy of St. Mark (2<sup>nd</sup> Century)

## **Sunday, May 28: 2 Samuel 6**

This may seem like an odd reading on "prayer." While David's dancing before the Lord certainly doesn't look like the stereotypical hands-folded-kneeling kind of prayer, his attitude is precisely the attitudes that ought to characterize our prayers. He is consumed by reverence for and a desire to rejoice in the Lord.

The background is this: Israel's holiest treasure, the ark of the covenant, was captured by the Philistines. They put it in the temple of their god, Dagon in Ashdod. Over two successive nights the image of Dagon (1) fell face down, and (2) fell again and was smashed to bits. Meanwhile, residents of Ashdod suffered terribly from sickness and a plague of rats. Eventually the Philistines loaded the ark on a cart and, with gifts of gold, returned it to the Israelites ([1 Samuel 5-6](#)).

In those days, the ark represented the presence of God on earth. It was incredibly holy. When some men in Beth-shemesh peek inside, to try to "see" God, seventy of them perish. They seem to think God is some little deity that lives in the box. They are judged for their pathetic understanding of who God is and their lack of reverence for His power and glory. Do we ever think God is too small? Do we ever try to sneak a peek and see if He is real? – test Him a bit? Try to force His hand?

After that act of sacrilege (and judgment), the ark languishes in the home of Abinadab in Kiriath-jearim for two decades. People were too afraid to go near it (1 Samuel 7:2). Finally, twenty years later, David and a host of people set out to bring the ark home to Jerusalem. There is great joy. *"David and all the people of Israel were celebrating before the Lord, singing songs and playing all kinds of musical instruments – lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets, and cymbals."*

At the threshing floor of Nacon, another mishap occurs. The ark is supposed to be carried by people. Instead, they have it on an ox cart. It slips. Uzzah reaches out to steady it. He dies. His death seems harsh. After all, Uzzah is just eager to protect God's honour. Do we feel we need to defend God? That song is not reverent enough? Why doesn't that guy take his hat off in church? She shouldn't be wearing ripped jeans? His lifestyle is wrong? Does God need us to protect Him? Our God is an awesome God who doesn't need us to defend His honour. He can do that very well on His own. Remember *"The Lord doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."*

Finally, the ark arrives in Jerusalem. What does David do? He makes sacrifices. That's good. And *"David danced before the Lord with all his might, wearing a priestly garment. David and all the people of Israel brought up the Ark of the Lord with shouts of joy and the blowing of rams' horns ... King David (was) leaping and dancing before the Lord ..."* Try to picture it. David's wife is not impressed. She accuses him of making a spectacle of himself. David says, *"I was dancing before the LORD ... I celebrate before the LORD."*

Michal is disgusted. David's behaviour is so undignified. What must people think of him (and, by extension, her)??? But David isn't dancing for/praising **them**, is he? His heart is completely focused on worshipping and praising **God**. He is dancing for **God**. **God's opinion** is the only one that matters. From what we see, apparently God is just fine with David's worship. He's not zapped like Uzzah.

I'll be honest. I completely empathize with author John White, who writes, *"I am British by birth and breeding, so that stuffiness in my shirts is resistive to the wash. In meetings where people feel led by the Spirit to lift their hands, I find I have rheumatic shoulders. I could no more dance in the Spirit than I could be a trapeze artist. Yet I know when due allowance has been made for fads, bandwagon followers, and for phonies, there are those to whom God's Spirit gives the grace to praise him in just the way David did."*

*"Dance if you want before the Lord. Sing his praises with an abandoned joy. Be merry in his presence and clap your hands. Let your guitars sound their melodies and your castanets their rhythm. Stomp your feet and sway your body. But remember you are in the presence of the Most High God. He gives you breath. He holds your pulsing heart between his fingers. His anger against evil will never cease. It does not harm you because in your case it is assuaged by the blood of His only Son. And for His sake, he welcomes you with love. Let your rejoicing then be with reverence and godly fear."*

Today, pray and praise with your whole heart, in whatever way works for you. And don't get stressed if other people praise God in different ways.

*May God the Father, the eternal High Priest Jesus Christ,  
and the Holy Spirit, build us up in faith and truth and love.*

*May He grant us a place among the saints  
with all those who believe on our Lord Jesus Christ.  
We pray for all saints (those who believe in Jesus).*

*We pray for kings and rulers.*

*We pray for the enemies of the cross of Christ.  
And for ourselves we pray that our fruit may abound  
– that we may feed and bless a starving world –  
a world starved for Jesus,  
and a world starved for holy, practical love.*

*May we all be made perfect in Christ Jesus, our Lord.  
Amen.*

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (martyred AD 155)